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KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN
FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES



CHRIST, THE IMAGE OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
Towards a Transformative Christology in the African Context

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the Doctor's Degree (Ph.D.)
in Theology (S.T.D.)

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2020

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With utmost affection

*To my mother, Okwuchukwu-Rose,
who, by her embodied faith in Christ and her sacrificial love,
taught me what the deepest nature and task of theology are.*

*To my father, Obiora,
my greatest exemplar of a meek and wise human being.
My longing is to be and to live like him.*

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their spirit and grit.

"*Omnia Christus est nobis!* To us, Christ is all! If you have a wound to heal, he is the doctor; if you are parched by fever, he is the spring; if you are oppressed by injustice, he is justice; if you are in need of help, he is strength; if you fear death, he is life; if you desire heaven, he is the way; if you are in the darkness, he is light....Taste and see how good is the Lord: blessed is the man who hopes in him!" (*De Virginitate*, 16, 99).

–Saint Ambrose of Milan

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A.M.D.G.

Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi
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Feast of Christ the King

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAS	<i>Acta Apostolicae Sedis</i>
ACSS	African Christian Studies Series
AFER	African Ecclesial Review
BETL	<i>Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium</i>
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CSD	Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church
CST	Catholic Social Teaching
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
HDI	Human Development Index Report
<i>Infra</i>	Below
JB	Jerusalem Bible
LTPM	Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SECAM	Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar
<i>Supra</i>	Above
UN	United Nations
WAJES	West African Journal of Ecclesial Studies
WHO	World Health Organization

Notes on Convention and Style

Throughout this dissertation, I will use ‘Church’ when referring more specifically to the Roman Catholic Church, in which the Church of Christ subsists. I will use ‘church,’ when referring to the more broad, multid denominational ecclesial life of Christianity, where elements of sanctification and truth can be found. (See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8).

For the nouns, “Christology”, “Christologies”, and “Christologist” I use the upper case ‘C’. Where I make use of the adjectival, adverbial and verbal referents, that is, “christological,” “christologically” and “christologize,” respectively, I use the lower case ‘c’.

When providing substantial analysis of an author’s work, however, I try to respect his or her own convention. This should be clear from the context. I utilize inclusive language throughout the text unless, when providing an extensive quotation, substituting inclusive language makes the text difficult to read or interpret.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

“The Christian faith has only one subject, the mystery of Christ dead, risen, and alive. But this unique mystery subsists under different modes: it is prefigured in the Old Testament, it is accomplished in the earthly life of Christ, it is contained in the mystery of the sacraments, it is lived mystically in souls, it is accomplished socially in the Church, it is consummated eschatologically in the heavenly kingdom. Thus, the Christian has at its disposition several registers, a multi-dimensional symbolism, to express this unique reality.”

–Jean Daniélou¹

“It is quite clear that Jesus, in His public ministry, was actively and simultaneously involved in both personal and social reconstruction. He mobilized His followers to become involved in social change, having convinced them of the necessity and urgency to change their attitudes towards themselves and the world.”

–Jesse Mugambi²

1. Land of my Mother, Faith of her Children: African Context in Perspective

Christ, “the image of God and of all creation” (Col 1:15), is a significant reality among Africans today.³ Christ is experienced as being present to the African person, not just as a historical personage or as a socio-cultural icon, but, very importantly, as the real abiding gift of God’s own life. Hence, he is proclaimed as *good news*, and as the subject of living faith and hope in Africa. This faith is lived within the context of challenging social realities. Realities that have made me, as Jon Sobrino says, while speaking of the Latin American social situation, “to think a lot about Jesus Christ,” and the kind of change he was seen as bringing, or to have brought about.⁴ More than simply thinking about Christ, the realities move me to also contemplate him and (in) his people, who continue to *wrestle* with faith and hope in Christ, in situations of unimaginable deprivation.⁵ This dissertation is a work

¹ Jean Daniélou, “Le Symbolisme des Rites baptismaux,” *Dieu Vivant* 1 (1945): 15-43, at 17. The English translation is from the conference description of the 2018 Theological Conference of the Pusey House, Oxford, “*Totus Christus: Knowing and Loving the Son of Man.*”

² Mugambi quoted by Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 221.

³ In this work, the names “Jesus”, “Christ”, “Jesus Christ”, “Jesus the Christ” and “Christ Jesus” are used interchangeably with no theological distinction intended. The creed followed in this study is faith “in the *one* Lord Jesus Christ,” which represents the basic statement of Christian belief in the unity and identity of Christ confessed by the apostle Paul (1 Cor 8:6). For a recent and remarkably fine discussion of this basic christological confession of the *one* Christ, see Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), at xvi.

⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, translated from the Spanish by Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993; Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1994), 8. See also Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, translated from the Spanish by Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 2-8.

⁵ This resonates with the beautiful thoughts of Pope Francis that, “a preacher [and I add, a theologian, not least a Christologist] has to contemplate the Word, but he or she also has to contemplate his or her people.” Pope Francis, “Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, *Evangelii*

of my own wrestle – in solidarity with these faithful disciples – with what could be the deeper theological-practical meaning and implications of connecting Jesus Christ to a human situation: the painful experience of sickness, oppression and systemic injustice, which move many Africans to long unceasingly and eagerly for Christ’s transforming presence and action. In other words, the dissertation seeks to contribute to this shared longing for personal and social well-being in Africa, rooted in a strong sense of God’s ongoing incarnation, and of the transformative power of Jesus Christ.

Some of the challenging social realities I have mentioned above, and the christological responses to them, provide the backdrop to the present research. I do not intend to dwell so much on the social issues. There is no doubt the social realities provide the context of the confession and practices of faith in Africa. They are realities that any interpretation of Jesus’ identity and work will have to face up to. There is a plethora of sociological, anthropological, theological, and ecclesiological works, which offer a moving account of the concrete realities of the griefs and anxieties, the joys and hopes of Africa and her children.⁶ These works prove the point that, the social conditions of the vast majority of Africans, believers and non-believers alike, and the never-ending urgency to confront, engage, and possibly transform them, for the flourishing of its people, are, and continues to be, the privileged locus and focus of a christological exploration that is worth the venture. However, my focus in this research is on the christological responses or approaches to the social conditions of many Africans. My aim is to investigate how ordinary Christians and academic theologians have tried to understand the meaning and

Gaudium, 24 November 2013,” *AAS* 105 (2013): no. 154. See also Tatha Wiley, ed., *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2003), particularly the essays in Part Three titled “Christ and Social Transformation,” 155-210. See also Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, “Contemplating Christ and/in His People: The Practice of a Social Transformation-Oriented Christology in Africa,” in *What Does Theology Do, Actually?: Observing Theology and the Transcultural*, ed. Matthew Ryan Robinson and Inja Inderst (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 285-307.

⁶ To mention but a few of such works that narrate and critically engage the painful experiences of sickness, unbearable poverty and social injustice, and yet, the hope for abundant life of many Africans: Jeffrey Sachs, “The Voiceless Dying: Africa and Disease,” in *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 188-209; Jean-Marc Éla, *Afrique, L’irruption des Pauvres: Société contré, Ingérence, Pouvoir et Argent* (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 1994); Engelbeth Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 154-165; Bénédet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. John O’Donohue (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); Stan Chu Ilo, *The Face of Africa: Looking Beyond the Shadows* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006); idem, “*Africae Munus* and the Challenges of a Transformative Missional Theological Praxis in Africa’s Social Context,” *Transformation* 31 (2014): 116-131, at 118-121; idem, “Suffering and Smiling,” in *God in Africa: Christianity, Modernity and Africa’s Futures* (unpublished work, also delivered as Joint Alan Richardson Lecture/Catholic Theology Research Seminar, Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, United Kingdom, 2 December, 2019); Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, “Africa my Africa: The Grit of the Matter (November 2011),” <https://www.ignatiansolidarity.net> [accessed 25 January, 2018]; idem, *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000); idem, *From Crisis to Kairos: The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005); idem, “*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa’s Burden of (Under)Development,” *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 320-334; Emmanuel Katongole, *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005); idem, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017); idem, *The Journey of Reconciliation: Groaning for a New Creation in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

significance of Christ's identity and work in their engagement with the social issues in the context.

The quest to embark on such investigation here is all the more inspired, not just by the social realities, but, very importantly, by the vibrant christological imagination (the lively faith experience and expressions) of the African Christians, which arguably is informed also by those realities.⁷ This christological faith, according to Nigerian theologian, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, requires deeper and probing questions about its credibility and relevance under the current social dispensation in the continent.⁸ For Orobator, and for anyone seriously concerned about the social relevance or impact of christological belief in Africa, the ubiquity and pervasiveness of Christian confession in Africa requires a more *critical and constructive systematic-theological exploration of a uniquely christological input*. This is what I am trying to do in this dissertation. I do that along the lines of three closely interwoven christological themes. They are: (1) the enhanced *relationship* of Christians with Christ and other human beings, (2) the empowered *agency* of Christians as an outflow of this relationship, and (3) the embodied *practices* of solidarity, both within and beyond ecclesial communities, as the form of Christian discipleship. These christological themes are grounded in the most fundamental reality, which is the reality of God the Son who became human and consubstantial with humanity. I would argue that from an investigation of these themes emerges a more profound understanding of how Christ transforms society as well as how images of Christ can provide resources for Christian social engagement for the transformation of societies in Africa.

Such an endeavour as mine here, Orobator rightly contends, is all the more urgent because of "the irony...in the fact that, in Africa the fortunes of religious faith, affiliation, and practices flourish in inverse proportion to the continent's social misfortunes."⁹ So, the question we need to keep alive is, to what extent does the Christian faith, or in particular, christological belief, empower Africans to confront their myriad individual and collective existential challenges?¹⁰ And how can the belief be reconstituted to do so if – as – it is not

⁷ For the profile and activities of Christian belief and its vibrancy in Africa, see the demographic account and interpretative essays by Gina A. Zurlo and Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu in *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 3-42. See also Kwame Bediako, "Christian Theology and Presence in Modern Africa," in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 3-19. These scholars describe how in Africa there are more than three hundred million Christians, which is 10 percent of the entire population of Africa, and 2.5 percent of the world's population. Needless to say the number of new Christians continues to grow day-by-day. These figures point to a reality, a Christian presence, that one cannot take for granted in any theological discussion of, and the human involvement in actions that could bring about, the transformation of the societies in which such a large number of people live. As Jon Sobrino puts it, although "quantitative argument is not decisive for Christology," or for christological discourse about social transformation, the quantitative referent, insists Sobrino, "is extremely important for a pastoral work," and all the more, for a christological exploration that aims to inspire and foster a new disposition, understanding and commitment in the effort to build a more just and humane society. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 13.

⁸ Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa: The Confessions of an Animist* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 85. See also Orobator, "Caritas in Veritate and Africa's Burden of (Under)Development," 332.

⁹ Orobator, "Caritas in Veritate and Africa's Burden of (Under)Development," 331.

¹⁰ Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, "Concluding Reflections," in *Christianity and Culture Collision: Particularities and Trends from a Global South*, ed. Cyril Orji and Joseph Ogbonnaya (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 220.

yet adequately doing that? Thus is formulated, but in a much more specific tone and focus, the question which this research project seeks to answer.

2. Research Question(s) and (Hypo)thesis

Research Question(s)

The main research questions guiding the study are: How does the figure of Jesus Christ (that is, the confession of faith in him, and the theological perspectives on his life and mission) affect the way Christians work to build a more just and humane society in Africa? More specifically, how does the imagination of Christ as healer, liberator and king in the grassroots Christian communities, and the theological reflections on these christological images, shape the Christian vocation and responsibility towards the transformation of African society?

To spell out the questions along the lines of the research structure: Chapters 1 and 2 in particular address the question of how the (re)imagination of Christ's identity and work as healer, liberator and king in the grassroots Christian communities, and academic theological milieu, respectively, contribute (or not) to the socially transformative aspect of Christian faith in the African context. In Chapter 3, a question of appropriation is addressed. The chapter asks how, and with what christological model, these images of Christ can be critically appropriated in order to provide resources of faith that could transform and (re)orient Christians to become more committed to practices that will bring about a more just social order. The meaning and implications of this christological model and the insights therefrom, are the focus of the fourth and final chapter. So, Chapter 4 asks what the model's implications are for fleshing out the theological-practical connection between belief in Jesus Christ and social transformation in Africa. Also considered is the question of what consequences the insights have for delineating the trajectories of a Christology that is able to transform life and practices in the context.

These questions are no less theological as they are pastoral. I have grappled with them myself during the eleven years (2003-2014) of my apostolic engagement within grassroots Christian communities in Nigeria. Also, the questions are informed by the fact that one of the urgent tasks of African theologians is to reflect critically but constructively about the vibrant christological imagination of African Christian consciousness, particularly from within the grassroots level. They are to do so, not only to create a 'new' African Christology, but to inspire a *new* form of Christian discipleship – as ecclesial-social solidarity – that will contribute to the transformation of African society.

(Hypo)thesis

The hypothesis undergirding this research is that narratives and interpretations about the identity and work of Jesus Christ in the grassroots Christian communities, and by academic theologians, respectively, have a socially transformative dimension and potential. Critical social issues, for example, preventable and curable illnesses, unbearable poverty, and systemic social injustice in the context of Africa, inspire the proclamation, and drive the

reflections about particular images of Christ like healer, liberator, and king, in the Christian and theological landscapes. Therefore, as these christological images are more critically appropriated and adopted – in terms of an enhanced relationship with Christ and with other people, empowered human agency, and embodied practices of solidarity – in contemporary African Christian existence, they serve to redress the very issues that prompt their invocation and representation.¹¹

Following this train of reasoning, it would seem that there are two moments in Africa's ecclesial-social context that can create the conditions necessary for a socially transformative Christology. They are: (1) the appreciation and critical retrieval of popular christological narratives in African Christianity, and (2) the constructive integration of the narratives as avenues for an enhanced relationship, engaged agency, and embodied praxis, within and beyond the ecclesial communities. Taken together, they constitute the two inseparable dynamics – “restitution” and “conscientization” – necessary for exploring and disclosing the potential of christological belief in Africa.¹²

3. Scholarly (Theological) Context of the Research: Issues and the Problem to be Addressed

This section is a modest attempt to situate the research within the broader scholarly context and other related literature. It shows how the present research rests on the body of preceding and existing scholarship in which, to some degree, the subject of the socially transformative relevance of christological belief in Africa has been explored either directly or indirectly. African theologians and other scholars of African Christianity have always engaged in the task of discerning, articulating, and presenting the African experience and understanding of Jesus Christ. They have, in addition, increasingly recognised that such a task has to be in tandem with the nation-building dreams, the aspiration of people in Africa for a transformed society – a society in which the health, wellbeing, and flourishing of every human being are fostered. However, there has not been any sustained theological systematization and rendering of the outlines and content of such an engagement. This should be done critically but constructively from the vantage point of the vibrant christological imagination and narratives of the vast majority of ordinary Christians, particularly at the grassroots level. The theological engagement should also take seriously the fundamental reality of the Incarnation as the ground of Christian social commitment that is transformative.

In what follows I shall give an overview of the important positions in the discussions with a view to highlighting further the matter that has been under consideration, and the problem that the present research seeks to address. I will organize my discussion within the scope of three theological or scholarly debates about: (a) the role of Christian faith and churches in social transformation in Africa, (b) the social relevance of christological belief

¹¹ For a similar line of thinking, see Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 251.

¹² For my understanding and articulation of this idea, I am indebted to the work of Jesuit theologian, Michael L. Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 668-692, at 672.

within the trends in contemporary African Christology, and (c) the theme of (social) transformation as a core christological motif in the works of transformation theologians.

a. On the Role of Christian Faith and Churches in the Transformation of African Society

There has been a lot of discussions on how the practice of Christian faith could and should serve the transformation of African society. Many of the discussions have focused mainly, and almost exclusively, on the role of religion in general, the role of churches, and particularly church hierarchy, in the work of social transformation in Africa. Such that relatively little or no attention is paid to the disciplined – though sometimes undisciplined – christological imagination of Christian communities. By this I mean the vast array of ways that Christians in various grassroots communities have made sense of Jesus Christ in relation to the quest for societal change; or, specifically, the images in which they express their understanding of Christ's identity and work, and how these either contribute to or undermine the quest for social transformation in Africa. This is to say, the images of Christ have not been critically explored in the conversations about the (ir)relevance of Christian faith for the transformation of society in the context.

A few representative works under this category include those of Elias Kifon Bongmba,¹³ Paul Gifford,¹⁴ Stan Chu Ilo,¹⁵ and Mwenda Ntarangwi.¹⁶ These authors did

¹³ Elias Kifon Bongmba, *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Elias Kifon Bongmba ed., *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, Studies in World Christianity and Interreligious Relations (New York, NY: Routledge 2018). See particularly the book chapter dealing on the role of African Christian practices and churches in social transformation, Elias K. Bongmba, "Rethinking Power in Africa: Religious and Theological Perspectives," in *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa*, 167-198.

¹⁴ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity and Its Public Role* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998); *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: C. Hurst & C. Publishers Ltd., 2004); *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya* (London: C. Hurst & C. Publishers Ltd., 2009); *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: C. Hurst & C. Publishers Ltd., 2015). This latest work draws mainly upon examples of Christianity and Church practices in Nigeria.

¹⁵ Stan Chu Ilo, "Africae Munus and the Challenges of a Transformative Missional Theological Praxis in Africa's Social Context," *Transformation* 31 (2014): 116-131. In this article, for instance, Ilo proposes what he calls "transformative ecclesial praxis." He describes it mainly within the contours of the pastoral activities of the Church hierarchy. Such a paternalistic way of thinking about the role of the Church in social transformation, obviously, is inspired by an idea in Benedict XVI's Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, which Ilo largely draws insights from. In it, the Pope challenges African theologians to become committed to the practice of a "transforming theology." For the Pope, such a theology is one in which theological principles are translated into concrete ecclesial-pastoral practices that "find application in the activity of bishops and priests." Benedict XVI, "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, On the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace, *Africae Munus*, 19 November 2011," *AAS* 104, no. 4 (2012): no. 10. Other works by Ilo include: *The Church and Development in Africa: Aid and Development from the Perspectives of Catholic Social Ethics*, 2nd ed., ACSS 2 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014); Stan Chu Ilo, Joseph Ogbonnaya and Alex Ojacor, eds., *The Church as Salt and Light: Path to an African Ecclesiology of Abundant Life*, ACSS 1 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011). Though in this later work, Ilo sheds only a dim light on the need to begin from a christological vantage point in exploring the Church's social engagement in Africa. See Ilo, "Beginning Afresh with Christ in the Search for Abundant Life in Africa," 1-33; Stan Chu Ilo, ed., *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life* (Lanham, MN: Lexington Books, 2018).

¹⁶ Mwenda Ntarangwi, ed., *Jesus and Ubuntu: The Social Impact of Christianity in Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011). See also Peter Okechukwu Nwankwo, *Social Development in Rural Communities in South-Eastern Nigeria: A Mission of Charity* (New Jersey, NJ: Transaction Publication, 2006).

and still do a great job in investigating how Christianity and its practice, at both individual and communal level in Africa, can make more of a social impact in the continent. With the work of Ilo as a notable exception, though still not on a very sustained systematic theological level, the authors do not probe or engage the underlying christological motif of Christianity's impact, or lack of it, in the social context of Africa. Moreover, the talk about African Christianity and churches can be such a broad and complex field in investigating the social impact of belief in the context. Hence, a specific attention to the christological aspect might be more helpful in plumbing the social dimension and role of Christian faith and churches in Africa. This is to say, christological imagination and social imagination are inextricably entwined.¹⁷ The transformation of the social order, which these scholars study and envisage, I argue, finds its basis, justification, and vitality in the person and work of Christ, in the meaning and implications of his life and mission. So, any rendering of a Christian-inspired pursuit of social transformation must account for and demonstrate how following Christ within one's context, individually or collectively, can effectively inform the manner in which Christians – by their faith and its practice, both within and beyond their churches – seek to transform the social sphere that they inhabit with others. Let us then see, very briefly, whether and to what extent theologians within the trends in contemporary African Christology have paid attention to this christological dynamic. I will keep it brief because it is the subject of a longer and more detailed discussion in the second chapter of this dissertation.

b. In the Field of Contemporary African Christology

There are many early and contemporary African scholars, south of the Sahara, who have produced a body of literature dealing with the subject of christological belief and its relation to social transformation in Africa.¹⁸ In the literature, there is an obvious attention to the

¹⁷ Ugandan theologian, Emmanuel Katongole, explores this idea in his book *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination*. But he does so mainly from a social-ethical perspective, and with a focus on “the reality of the church as the site through which a new future for Africa is both imagined and becomes a reality.” Like Ilo, most of the ethical proposals that Katongole successfully commends in response to the challenging social conditions in Africa do not still come forth as grassroots initiatives or undertaking of ordinary Christians. They are more of ‘top-down’ recommendations for the privileged ecclesiastical and pastoral leaders. It is only in one chapter that is entitled “Of Faces of Jesus and The Poisonwood Bible,” does Katongole offer a christological pointer to the project of imagining Africa's future from within the life and concrete practices of the Church, understood in terms of every member and actions of everyday Christians. See Katongole, *A Future for Africa*, x, 211-230.

¹⁸ Some of the recent theological (christological) works are those of the proponents of African theology of reconstruction. Advocates of African theology of reconstruction – one of the three main trends in African theology – called for the reconstruction of Africa, based not on the inculturation and liberation motifs, but on the biblical motifs of the New Testament Resurrection-Event. They insist that the building of a new society “be based not on the logic of market economy, but on the logic of Christological-Resurrection-Event of Jesus Christ.” In their works, they place special emphasis on the social transformation of Africa. These include the works of Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1995); “African Churches in Social Transformation,” *Journal of International Affairs*, 50.1 (1996): 194-220; *The Church and Reconstruction of Africa: Theological Considerations* (Nairobi: AACC, 1997); “Christian Mission and Social Transformation After the Cold War,” *Journal of Constructive Theology*, 4.2 (1998): 65-86; *Christian Mission and Social Transformation* (Nairobi: Acton, 2003). See also Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights* (Cambridge: University Press, 1992). Also, Kā Mana, *Christians and*

christological, but not from the perspective of the ordinary, grassroots Christians' experience and understanding of the Christ-event. The attention to the christological is mainly from within the privileged interpretation and re-presentation of the academic theologians themselves. In their mode of christologizing about the quest for social transformation in Africa, there is, wittingly or unwittingly, a marginalization, and sometimes, an undermining of the grassroots christological perspectives. The consequence is that the two conditions which I mentioned earlier, "re-ristination" and "integration," for the possibility of a transformative Christology are also entirely foreclosed.¹⁹ Most of the scholars have scantily considered only the first condition (re-ristination), and entirely omitted the second (appropriation and integration).

For example, in his essay entitled *Beginning Afresh with Christ in the Search for Abundant Life*, the Nigerian theologian, Stan Chu Ilo, discusses Christianity's contribution to social transformation.²⁰ Ilo carries out the investigation from a uniquely christological standpoint. The problem is that in his engagement with the christological dimension, Ilo does not give sustained attention to popular Christologies in African Christianity. According to him, the images of Christ in contemporary African Christianity are "speculative creations often not rooted in biblical evidence; nor do they reflect or respond to the liturgical practices and pastoral challenges facing African Christians."²¹ Ilo offers two reasons for his criticism and disregard of the grassroots christological images. First, the images of Christ in contemporary African Christianity do not clearly show "the transcendence of Christ and his immanence in history in the present painful and challenging African social context."²² Second, the images of Christ, especially as presented in African theology, "have often been based on inadequate cultural hermeneutics and anecdotal and scattered references to biblical evidence, without any thoroughgoing exegetical commitment in the explication of the data of Scripture."²³

Churches of Africa Envisioning the Future: Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Building of a New African Society (Yaoundé: CLE, 2002); *Christians and Churches of Africa: Salvation in Christ and Building of a New African Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

¹⁹ Michael Cook has argued that the two dynamics, particularly at the grassroots level or directed to the grassroots Christologies, constitute the inseparable factors necessary for a societal transformation that is truly liberative, encompassing, and enduring. See Michael Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 177, 179-180. The idea is discussed in the chapter of the book titled "A Social Transformation Image: 'The Rejected Prophet' in the Mexican American Experience." A similar line of thought is pursued in his "Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America," *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 258-287; and in "The African Experience of Jesus," 672.

²⁰ Ilo, "Beginning Afresh with Christ in the Search for Abundant Life," 1-33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 5. I will examine and evaluate in greater detail some of these claims in the first chapter that explores the popular images of Christ in African Christianity. Let me briefly note here, for now, that grassroots christological images are the people's expression of their simple understanding of the transcendence of Christ and of his immanence. I will also show, in that same chapter 1, that these christological images are concretizations of the creedal formulation of Christ's identity as "true God and true man." Moreover, Ilo's criticism that these images of Jesus have been based on inadequate "cultural hermeneutics" is not so correct and representing of the method, task, substance, and content of the works of the African theologians, some of whom we shall engage their works in chapter 2. I should also note that Ilo neither mentions any particular christological image, nor does he cite any African theologian or theological work, in which the images of Christ have not shown Christ's "transcendence" and "immanence", or have been based on "inadequate cultural hermeneutics." But as we shall see, the theological discourse of the grassroots christological images, at least, in some earliest African theological works, bear an understanding of the relationship that exist

Also, there are some theologians – Congolese Kä Mana, Nigerian Victor Ezigbo, and South African Jakobus Vorster – who have proposed ‘new’ and the so-called “constructive” christological models as theological responses to issues of social transformation in Africa.²⁴ For instance, Ezigbo develops what he calls the “Revealer Christology model” as corrective to and a “re-imagination” of grassroots Christologies.²⁵ He argues that the “Revealer” model engages concretely with both the Christ-Event and the real life experiences and social challenges of people. For his part, Jakobus Vorster speaks of the “Kingdom christological model.” He also claims this model allows for a fresh engagement of what he describes as the “Christologies of apartheid,” and a deeper exploration of the social relevance of christological belief in (South) African society.²⁶ However, these theologians are not able to integrate in a convincing and creative fashion the insights from their study of grassroots Christologies into the christological models they have put forward. Also, they are not able to open up these models, nor work out how they could be concretely translated, for the practice of faith at the grassroots, and for motivating Christian social engagement at that level, since they claim their reflections are set to correct the grassroots Christologies, on the one hand, and “to criticize and dismantle every form of dehumanization that confronts the peoples of Africa,” on the other hand.²⁷

There are even some theologians who are dismissive entirely of grassroots Christologies. They consider grassroots Christologies as forms of the prosperity-oriented Christianity, or vagaries of enchanted Christianity.²⁸ Thus, they seem not to be aware of the theological and practical content and impact of grassroots christological imagination or, probably, simply chose not to recognize that. These theologians neither value grassroots Christologies for themselves nor do they envision how the popular Christologies do or do not relate to the African Christian social (re)imagination. They are neither interested in the prevailing christological imagination in African Christianity, nor give an account of the popular expressions of Christ’s identity and work in the grassroots Christian communities. This, as our study will emphasize, is a fundamental omission in the development of any

between inculturation, liberation, and consequently, transformation of African society. For instance, Jean Marc Éla, a Catholic priest and theologian from Cameroon, whose theology could be regarded as the most representative of theologians of liberation theology is both empathetic to, but at the same time, critical of an African theology that is preoccupied with cultural interpretations (hermeneutics) as to ignore the more pressing issues of “the painful and challenging” social realities in contemporary Africa. See Jean Marc Éla, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 136-153; “The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ,” in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*, trans. and ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 17-35. I shall engage extensively with these and some other works by Éla in the second chapter. Therefore, Ilo’s critique against grassroots Christologies, and the reasons he gives for considering them as “speculative creations,” are not so sufficient.

²⁴ See, for example, Victor I. Ezigbo, *Re-imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 132 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010). See also Jakobus (Koos) M. Vorster, “A Case for a Transforming Christology in South Africa,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013): 310-326.

²⁵ Ezigbo, “A Revealer Christology: Towards a New Christological Model,” in *Re-imagining African Christologies*, 141-293.

²⁶ Vorster, “A Case for a Transforming Christology in South Africa,” 318-325.

²⁷ Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 293. See also Vorster, “A Case for a Transforming Christology in South Africa,” 326.

²⁸ See, for example, Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 107-124.

relevant theological (christological) response to the dehumanizing social conditions of many Africans, and in their longing for a transformed African society.

Granted, most of the scholars within the African christological trends, in their interpretation and representation of the various christological images, try to relate them to the quest for social transformation. However, no sustained systematic Christology of social transformation, particularly from within the christological experience and performance of Christians at the grassroots, has been developed in and for the context. There is something happening in the light of such christological vision of social transformation, within a broader scholarly frontier, precisely in the field of process and transformation theology. It might be a helpful move to refer to it; this also as a way of situating the present research within that larger academic context.

c. In the Scholarly Context of Transformation Theology (Christology)

The present research can be somewhat located, also, in the emerging discipline of “transformation theology.” There is a theological conversation in a small circle of scholars who identify themselves as “transformation theologians.” These theologians – people like Jakobus Vorster, whose article I already cited,²⁹ Bruce Epperly,³⁰ Oliver Davies, Paul Janz and Clemens Sedmak³¹ – consider their theological venture to be a new orientation in (systematic) theology.³² The new orientation, they claim, is characterised by a theological recognition of the place and significance of the commissioning Christ in our lives, in the lives of others, in the Church, in the world, and for the transformation of social order.³³ This is why for them, transformation theology, or rather a theology that has personal and/or social transformation as its core motif is fundamentally a christologically-centred one. And the critical question for such a (transformation) theology is: “Where is Jesus Christ today? Where is he transformatively present in my life, in the lives of others, and in society.”³⁴ They argue that this christological question has profound implications for the practice of systematic theology. Oliver Davies, for instance, contends that “the return to the ‘where’ question as a primary ecclesial question would signal a retrieval of Christ as present material as well as formal object of theology.”³⁵ As such, in this sense, “it would direct theology back into the world in search of the transforming power of Christ and the Spirit at work in Church and society.”³⁶ On the basis of this idea Davies states that, “the principle

²⁹ Jakobus (Koos) M. Vorster, “A Case for a Transforming Christology in South Africa.”

³⁰ Bruce Epperly, “Transforming Christology,” in *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2011), 62-76.

³¹ Oliver Davies, Paul D. Janz, and Clemens Sedmak, *Transformation Theology: Church in the World* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); Oliver Davies, *Theology of Transformation: Faith, Freedom, and the Christian Act* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Matthew Lamb’s book is perhaps an earlier work in this regard that comes to mind. See Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1982).

³² See Davies, “Theology in the World: A Reorientation of Theology,” in *Theology of Transformation*, 33.

³³ Davies, Janz, and Sedmak, *Transformation Theology*, 1-8.

³⁴ Davies, “Where is Jesus Christ?,” in *Theology of Transformation*, 3-32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁶ See also Davies, “Transformation Theology in Its Historical Context,” <https://www.academia.edu> [accessed September 12, 2019], 14. See also, *idem*, “Church and Life: Christ in Us,” and “Social Transformation: Newness of the World,” in *Theology of Transformation*, 97-168, 169-249.

of transformation determines the relation between the divinity and humanity of Christ as being one in which the divinity is hidden within the humanity and is only known as being hidden, rather than absent, by virtue of the transformation it effects.”³⁷

The current research is inspired by these directions and understandings. It tries to join in the conversation along their trail of reasoning. But it does so from a perspective that is very unique: for it begins from the grassroots in the attempt to provide an account of the present reality of Jesus Christ in a particular context today, and to systematically trace how Christ is transforming the lives of ordinary Christians at that level, so that they in turn can become fully themselves agents of Christ’s ongoing transformative presence and act, in other lives and in the societies in which they inhabit. In this regard, the research pursues a more contextual and concrete intelligibility of, and complement to, the works of these transformation theologians.

4. Scope and Methodology

a. Scope: Delimitation of the Study

Geographical delimitation: “Africa” in both a qualitative and a quantitative sense

Africa is a vast continent. So, differences among its nations must be acknowledged, as generalizations about the whole continent are always subject to inaccuracies. However, certain generalizations are legitimate and could be permissible, given the fact that most countries of Africa share a similar faith, history, culture, language, and not least, a similar fate. In the light of these, that is, what could be considered as the *qualitative* sense of Africa, it is still useful to speak of “Africa” and the “African” experience or context, however much of what is said must be qualified and applied to different concrete situations. As Michael Cook mentions concerning his own research on “the African experience of Jesus Christ,” which is also the case in the present research, “most of the authors cited have come from sub-Saharan equatorial Africa, East and West.”³⁸ “And they communicate their experiences to each other,” says Cook.³⁹ Thus, “there is a community of discourse that reflects a shared sense of Africanness.”⁴⁰

That said, I still offer a delimitation of the study in relation to the *quantitative* sense of the designation of Africa in this research, a kind of geographical delimitation. For this, in my research, I focus on four English-speaking sub-Saharan African countries – Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda and Kenya. I have chosen these countries also because of the sociological works on the Africans’ experience of encounter with Christ, at the grassroots level, which are readily available to me. Even still with this delimitation, it is not easy to speak of Africa. Each of these countries have multiple genealogies, meaning, and facets.⁴¹ Ghanaian

³⁷ Davies, *Theology of Transformation*, 99.

³⁸ Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 671.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ John Samuel Pobee, *Giving Account of Faith and Hope in Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 22.

theologian, John Samuel Pobee, has masterfully examined some of these facets in his work, and encourages that one can still go on to speak and write “in terms of *an* African.”⁴² This, however, should be done with a certain consciousness and a sense of the “variations, diversities, particularities, and peculiarities” on the continent, in the countries and social situations, which we have in view in the present research.⁴³

Systematic theological and not sociological research

I should like to add that the research is not an attempt to provide a christological blueprint for the ordering of social life, nor a christological program for social imagination. It is only a modest effort to explore the expressions and meaning of the vibrant christological faith in our land, and to reflect on its deeper significance for the Christian witness that contributes in the task of building a more humane and just society for the wellbeing of all in Africa. This point of view, however, does not mean the work is another case in point of a humanistic concern for the practical efficacy of christological belief. That said, and without losing sight of the pluralistic culture in my African society and in today’s world, I am researching as a Christian theologian, and writing as one, to followers of Christ, to those who continue to recognize him as the image of God and of all creation that includes the social sphere. So, the present research is not intended to be a generic presentation of ‘religious’ ideals to all members of the society that Christians share with others. That will amount to an overly ambitious, if not a failed project.

b. Methodology

The methodological orientation guiding the study is primarily systematic and thematic, focusing on the outlines of christological notions and perspectives that can provide resources for Christians’ engagement in the transformation of societies in Africa. The methodology also follows the traditional approach of describing, exposing and analysing texts. There is also the use of a critical but constructive, and correlational method.

Since I treat the topic of the relationship between christological belief and social transformation in the works of theologians, the approach to the theologians in chapter two will be more synchronic than diachronic, though the diachronic approach is not totally left out. The reason for this more synchronic approach is the fact that the focus is less on how they developed as theologians, and more on the synthesis of their christological insights in light of the social context of Africa. This is also why the focus is not on tracing every work of theirs or the contribution they have made, but on some of their main works. However, this is slightly different in my study of Jon Sobrino whose christological reflections I draw largely upon for the purpose of a more critical and sustained systematic appropriation of christological imagination and images. Hence, the methodology for studying Sobrino’s historical Christology, though, also analytical, will pay attention to how he developed his

⁴² Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

⁴³ Ibid., 21. For an anthropological and a sociological justification of these views in speaking or writing of “Africa”, see Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “African Diasporas: Toward a Global History,” *African Studies Review* 53, no. 1 (2010): 1-19, at 6.

historical Christology. While I have given a certain focus on how his own biography and the Latin American context influenced his christological writings, I do not set the theme within the context of the whole span of his writings. In analysing his christological works, I also relate the findings to the African context on the issues that are relevant for our consideration.

The final part, particularly in section 4 of chapter 3 and sections 1 – 3 of chapter 4, moves on from the conceptual-analytical towards a constructive correlational approach that seeks to bring together and translate in a systematic theological and practical fashion the result of my critical analysis of the grassroots, academic, and historical Christologies. Hence, I will privilege the method of correlation in the task of elucidating the connection between Christ and the Christian faith in him to the transformation of society.⁴⁴ Also in chapter 4, I adopt the method of interdisciplinary and intercontextual reflections in which I draw on insights from the works of African and non-African systematic theologians.

5. Relevance of the Research

a. Scholarly Relevance: Contemporary African Christology

Motivates new and sustained attention to grassroots Christologies

The study responds more conscientiously to the “clarion call” (that has long been made but often not heeded) for grassroots Christologies to be taken seriously.⁴⁵ It begins with a constructive but, still, critical engagement with how Christ is experienced and expressed in grassroots Christian communities. The novelty of this engagement lies in the way I tried to elevate the reality of the Christians’ experience and expressions of Christ’s identity and work to the level of a more inclusive socio-theological reality. I did that by introducing the

⁴⁴ Correlational method is a theological method, famously employed by Paul Tillich and David Tracy. The method allows for linking the insights embedded in the Christian experience to human experience. In the case of this research, the method helps in relating concrete, historical event of Christ’s life and mission to the basic structures of the Christian, human condition and existence, and can, subsequently, affect (transform) the social order. The method follows the logic in the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*. For a helpful discussion of the method of correlation in systematic theology, see David Tracy, “The Uneasy Alliance Reconciled: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 548-570.

⁴⁵ Diane Stinton in reiterating this idea resounds the call, and also refers to a number of sources in which theologians have made similar call. For example, Kwame Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century,” *Themelios* 20 (1994): 14-20; idem, “Guest Editorial: Lived Christology,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 8 (June 2005): 1. See also Patrick A. Kalilombe, “Doing Theology at the Grassroots: A Challenge for Professional Theologians. Part One,” *African Ecclesial Review* 27, no. 3 (June 1985): 148-161; idem, “Doing Theology at the Grassroots: A Challenge for Professional Theologians. Part Two,” *African Ecclesial Review* 27, no. 4 (August 1985): 225-237; John S. Pobee, “In Search of Christology in Africa: Some Considerations for Today,” in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, ed. John S. Pobee (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 11; Sam Amirtham and John S. Pobee, eds., *Theology by the People: Reflections on Doing Theology in Community* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 2-7; and the whole issue devoted to grassroots Christologies, entitled “Christ in African Experience – Reflections from Homeland and Diaspora,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 8, no. 1 (June 2005). See Diane Stinton, “Jesus–Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God: Aspects of Popular Christology in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1 (2007): 6-40, at 38n71. An updated media edition of this essay was recently delivered as a Regent College public lecture on 20 May, 2020. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of2NvPYeJh4> [accessed 22 May, 2020].

framework, imagination and image, in order to effectively theorize about a christological faith and hope that I see as a real encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, and a deep urgent longing for the kind of (societal) transformation that he brings.

By this token, my account of grassroots Christologies reifies, and so, reveals further the theological and social significance of christological belief in Africa – an insight that many theologians have not sufficiently highlighted in their christological reflections. In their own christological ventures, theologians tend to suggest that the disclosure or the realization of the socially transformative potential of grassroots Christologies, will be by the importation of some ‘extra’, instead of the flowering of what is already given in the vibrant faith experiences and expressions of Christians. In addition, the concentrated theological attention to grassroots Christologies in the research, re-directs and re-orientes christological discourse in African theological landscape; repositioning it within the context of the community called Church, and more importantly, in the wider society.

Helps to bridge the gap between grassroots and academic Christologies

By carrying on the theological and practical analysis of three images of Christ that are popular in grassroots Christian communities, into and in the second chapter, which engages the reflections of theologians on the images, the research tries to bridge the gap between academic and popular Christologies. In so doing, the research makes a contribution in the light of Kwame Bediako’s conviction that what is urgently demanded in the work of African theology “is a critical theological construction,” which on the one hand, “will relate more fully the widespread African confidence in the Christian faith to the actual and ongoing Christian responses to the life-experiences of Africans.”⁴⁶ On another hand, the demand “will need to connect with the less academic but fundamental reality of the theologies (Christologies) found at the grassroots of many, if not all, African Christian communities.”⁴⁷

In this light, what Davies, Janz and Sedmak say of the goal of transformation theology could also be said of the quest for a “transformative Christology,” particularly within the context of the present research. According to them, transformation theology (and so the present research in a modest fashion) “seeks to and does provide a groundwork for bridging the gulf that often exists between academic theology and the community of faith, by providing a rigorous theological account of the present reality of Jesus Christ in the world today, as this is already affirmed in living faith within the Church.”⁴⁸

Introduces elements of cross-cultural and contextual Christologizing

The research points to a resourceful theological move, namely, a creative-constructive sympathetic imagination, which consists of critical engagement beyond one’s particular context. This will be seen in the encounter between African (grassroots and academic)

⁴⁶ Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century,” 17.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Davies, Janz and Sedmak, *Transformation Theology*, 3.

Christologies, and the historical Christology of Jon Sobrino (even though the present research is not a work on Sobrino *per se*). While the encounter does not yield answers to all the doctrinal-social questions facing believing individuals and communities in Africa, it does provide the basis – Christ as incarnate divinity, *the* embodiment of human and societal flourishing – for rethinking christological moves and options that can serve as a response to the social issues in the African ecclesial-social context.

Transcends the divide between systematic and pastoral (practical) Christology

By holding both popular and academic Christology in a critical balance within the discourse about the social relevance of christological belief in Africa, the work transcends the divide between systematic and pastoral (practical) Christology.⁴⁹ Orobator has rightly argued that “the christological question in African Christianity is ultimately a pastoral challenge.”⁵⁰ He maintains that, “it is not sufficient to construct elaborate theological theses on...Jesus,” or on the images of his identity and work.⁵¹ For Orobator, “a more important step will be to outline the process of concrete application of the images in the lives of the ordinary Christian” who is torn between the worship of Christ and the reality of his or her social context.⁵²

Hence, the present research shares the idea that christological beliefs in Africa have the capacity to provide powerful motivations for social behaviour, whether intentionally or not, and for good or for bad. In other words, Christology, “specifically, as the discussion of the character of Jesus’ relationship with people,” has practical efficacy.⁵³ It has the ability to shape believers’ conduct in everyday life, and in that way, has a bearing on their behaviour.⁵⁴ It is from this point of view that the research contributes to the task of bridging the divide between systematic and practical (pastoral) Christology. Again, for Orobator, it is only through such systematic and pastoral “integration that one can hope to reverse the present situation whereby alluring glossy faces of an African Christ appear only on book covers, while he remains a stranger and an alien in the lives and deliberations of the millions of African Christians.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ An excellent work which has been done with this purpose in mind is by the late North American theologian, Gabriel Fackre, *Christology in Context: A Pastoral Systematics*, The Christian Story vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

⁵⁰ Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, “The Quest for an African Christ: An Essay on Contemporary African Christology,” *Hekima Review* 11 (September 1994): 75-99, at 95.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.* This is what I shall try to do in the fourth and final chapter.

⁵³ See Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 208.

⁵⁴ For more on this understanding of the relationship between Christian belief and action, see the first chapter of Kathryn Tanner’s *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 1-34. See also, Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos-Baker Publishing Group, 2011).

⁵⁵ Orobator, “The Quest for an African Christ,” 96.

b. Social Relevance: A Vision for Transformed Society

The research turns in a unique manner to the question of how to approach social transformation from a perspective that draws upon insights from Christology, as I have mentioned. In other words, in this work I approach the issue of social transformation in Africa christologically: that is, from a point of view rooted in belief in Jesus Christ, in the christological narrative and thinking of African Christians and theologians. Thus, the research is a modest effort to re-present Christ in a manner that is beneficial to the faith of Christians, to the life and mission of the Church, and very importantly, to the ongoing work of building a just society in Africa. It is an effort to provide a christological outline that will allow faith in Jesus Christ to continue guiding the faithful to reproduce the reality and work of Jesus Christ as healer, liberator and king, in their own lives and in the lives of others. In doing so, they are able to build up together a society that is directed to the reign of the kingdom of God – of human well-being, of liberation, and of justice – proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

What this means is that my research is not directly concerned with the social, but is concerning the pre-social and post-social, with huge social implications. The research is relevant to the point that it explores and highlights the socially transformative aspect and potential of the African experience and understanding of Jesus Christ.⁵⁶ This is in line with what Walter Kasper long ago drew attention to as the second basic task of Christology, which is, the development of a “universally responsible Christology...that has to do at least in rudimentary terms with the *relation* between faith in Jesus Christ and human or social needs.”⁵⁷

c. Personal Relevance: Faith Seeking Individual and Social Transformation

Last but not the least, the work is relevant to me. It is important to me in my own search for a spiritual and pastoral orientation that is at once grounded in a personal relationship with Christ, and, at the same time, spills over and flowers in the effort to contribute to the building of a just, more human and humane society in Africa. The research has helped me in cultivating a disciplined sensibility to the struggle of faith and hope of many of my compatriots in relation to the issues of poverty, injustice and vulnerability that burden their lives. As such, in the course of the research, I have, time and again, come to a joyful but challenging realization that, the christological investigation of social transformation is profoundly a call to personal transformation, beginning with the one who engages in the investigation.

Therefore, a demand is made of me, and I feel the edge, to open up more and more to the transforming reality of Christ, and to the concrete realities of his people. And in being thus open, I become myself more vulnerable to those realities. This in turn raises my awareness that these realities can and ought to be transformed by the power of Christ

⁵⁶ See Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 229-239.

⁵⁷ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (London: Burns and Oates Limited, 1976), 20-21. See also Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, New ed. (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 8-9. Emphasis mine.

working in and with me and my fellow human beings. What is more, I feel an urgent demand is made of me, by the grace of Christ's life that has been granted me, to take responsibility and transform the social situation of my many suffering brothers and sisters in Africa and elsewhere.

6. Theme and Structure

In order to address the research question(s) formulated above, and to evaluate the accompanying research hypothesis, this investigation is carried out in the course of four chapters and an appendix.

The first chapter is titled "Imagining Christ for Social Transformation at the Grassroots: A Constructive-Theological Account." In it I examine three images of Christ – healer, liberator and king – that are dominant in the grassroots Christian communities in sub-Saharan African context. From my analysis of the meaning and function of these images at the grassroots level, I argue that they bear a potential for Christian vocation and responsibility towards the transformation of societies in Africa. However, the socially transformative potential of the christological beliefs is not yet critically distilled given the way many Christians appropriate the images in their journey of faith and life. The majority of Christians believe that Christ's identity and work as healer, liberator and king, and their vibrant proclamation of him as such, will *alone* bring about the transformation of their society. This christological attribute, and the ensuing attitude, I maintain, are overly utilitarian, an instrumentalization of divinity, quite reductionistic, and tends to render Christians passive towards their social responsibility.

The second chapter is titled "(Re-) Imagining Christ for Social Transformation: A Critical Engagement with Three Trends." In it I review the insights of six African thinkers, two in each of the three trends in contemporary African Christology: inculturation, liberation and reconstruction. The scholars reflect on the theological-practical meaning of the images of Christ as healer, liberator and king, and their significance in relation to the quest for social transformation in Africa. The theologians whose works I review acknowledge that faith in Christ has radical implications for the transformation of (African) society. However, they render them in a way that I refer to in the chapter as mere "christological transposition." By this I mean the reworking and translation of the cultural (Shorter and Manus), biblical (Éla and Oduyoye), kerygmatic-ethical (Mana) and notional (Ezigbo) perspectives about the identity and work of Christ, and how they find application, mainly in the pastoral activities of Church hierarchy in Africa.

The third chapter is titled "Appropriating Christ for Social Transformation: Dialogue with Jon Sobrino's Historical Christology." The chapter enters into a critical-creative dialogue with Jon Sobrino's Christology, in which he analyses the earthly life and mission of Jesus Christ in relation to the quest for societal transformation. Sobrino presents an understanding of the identity and work of Christ around various dimensions. For the purpose of my research, I focus on three aspects. They are: (1) Jesus' relationship with the Father and other people, (2) Jesus' service to the Kingdom of God, and (3) Jesus' call to discipleship as the praxis of his resurrection and the ground of hope for the transformation of reality. Sobrino's reflections on these dimensions, with the christological model of

Christ's existence as "incarnate divinity," brings a much-needed clarity to the three notions of relationship, agency and praxis, which are highlighted in chapters one and two, and further fleshed out in the third and fourth chapters.

The fourth and final chapter is titled "Embodying, Engaging, and Enacting Christ: Christological Trajectories for Social Transformation in Africa." In the chapter, I lay out further how an enhanced relationship with Christ and with other human beings, an engaged human agency of African Christians, and embodied practices of solidarity within and beyond ecclesial communities, present the resources for realizing the socially transformative potential of christological belief in Africa. I do so by discussing the theological-practical meaning and formal shape of this embodied relationship, engaged agency, and enacted praxis. The chapter also reflects on their significance for (1) the pursuit of a social transformation-oriented Christology, (2) reinforcing the (social) mission of the Church, (3) the possibility of integrating a Christ-centred vision and ethic in the social sphere. Finally, the chapter concludes by emphasizing the need for Christians, who engage in society, or long for social transformation, to remain open to how Christ, by the working of the Spirit, continues to transform the social order in ways beyond their imagination. Thus, I highlight the pneumatological dimension of a transformative Christology.

Overall, the research aims to do four closely related things. First, it clarifies the possibilities and limits of proclaiming and reflecting on Christ's identity and work as healer, liberator and king found in the African Christian and theological landscapes, in the quest for social transformation. By doing so, it promotes greater dialogue between popular and academic Christologies. Second, the project contributes a new constructive, systematic layout of the theological-practical relation between belief in Jesus Christ and the Christian commitment to the transformation of societies. Third, the work uncovers the radical potential of vibrant christological belief and realigns it more with efforts to bring about a transformed society. Fourth, the study contributes a new social transformation-oriented Christology in and for the African context. The realization of all these aims proceeds from, and, at the same time, reinforces a singular line of argumentation: the ecclesial-social context of Christianity in Africa demands a Christology with a robust belief in, and affirmation of, Christ's – full and ongoing – incarnation, and subsequently, a strong connection among Christ, Christians and social change in the light of this belief.

CHAPTER ONE

IMAGINING CHRIST FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AT THE GRASSROOTS: A CONSTRUCTIVE-THEOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will investigate how Christians in the African ecclesial-social context perceive and understand Christ's identity and work, in relation to their shared longing for societal transformation. I will do so by examining three images of Christ which are popular in this context – healer, liberator and king. My attention here remains focused on the grassroots Christian communities. This choice is deliberately made because the present research explores how belief in Jesus Christ relates to the transformation of lives and societies in Africa. The research questions how this belief may be interpreted and put to action, in order better to contribute more effectively towards social change, particularly from within and at the grassroots level. It is therefore important to evaluate the meaning and function of the christological images around which a vast majority of Christians structure their daily life of faith, and how the images relate – or do not relate – to the much-needed work of personal and social transformation. This task of theological and practical analysis involves looking critically at their prayers, public worship, discourses, aspirations, hope, and most crucially, their faith practices.

As a sort of prolegomena, my first task early in this chapter is to justify my focus on the grassroots. Such an effort will entail addressing the question of why beginning at the grassroots is decisive in exploring the meaning of Jesus' life and mission, and its import for the work of social transformation in Africa. This initial orientation will be followed by a description of what I mean by grassroots Christologies. Next, I will (re)map and clarify the conceptual framework, "imagination" and "image". The purpose in doing so is to explain the nature of the christological experience and proclamations of Christians in a descriptive yet theologically sensitive manner. My thoughts will also aim to shed preliminary light on the possibility of how the African experience and expressions of faith in Christ may serve as resources for Christian commitment to societal transformation in the context. This sequence of conceptual and descriptive building blocks, as it were, will help create the desired tone and direction of the research presentation.

In the light of my conceptual explanations, I will, in the third section, identify three images of Christ – healer, liberator and king – each of which are popular amongst Christians at the grassroots level. I will explore the narratives that frame their respective meanings and functions at that level. In doing so, I argue that the grassroots Christologies have theological substance. Put simply, they flow from the Christians' encounter with Jesus Christ. They are proclamations about Christ's transforming presence and actions among Christians who themselves belong to dynamic church communities from which the christological images arise. In addition to the theological character, the study will observe that the grassroots Christologies have a social dimension. They mirror and are fostered by the concrete, challenging social conditions of many Africans, Christians and non-Christians alike. For this reason, the images I explore here are also expressions of a deep longing for

the kind of change Christ brings about – a transformed society in which healing, life in freedom, human well-being and flourishing are fostered.

At the same time, in the third section, I also raise the question of why these vibrant christological imagination and images have not been able to transform the social situation, or at least, motivate a new and more concerted Christian commitment to the transformation of society in Africa. My aim in thinking about the relative perceived failure of African christological imagination is to subject the images examined in previous sections to a thoroughgoing theological and practical critique. In other words, by looking at the actual operation of the experience and invocation of Christ at the grassroots level, I seek to also highlight the limits of the grassroots Christologies, and the challenges they pose to the struggle for faith and the actualization of their potential for social transformation. In this way, I hope to show how christological beliefs (a specific variant of them that is equally dominant in African Christianity) undermine rather than enhance critical Christian response to the situation of widespread oppression, systemic injustice, and degradation of the social and natural environment that give rise to numerous illnesses.

Despite the limits and challenges of these vibrant Christologies of African Christian faith and collective imagination, I still consider that they have theological significance and can present the resources for orienting and re-motivating Christians to become more committed to social transformation in their contexts. Spelling out this argument will lead me, in the fourth section, to take a step back and briefly survey the ‘classical’ christological sources: sacred scripture, the faith experience of the early Christian community, and the Church’s creedal formulations about Christ’s life and work. These sources provide the foundation for further analysis, for they aid me in plumbing the deeper meaning and significance of the christological images for their broader historical, theological and practical significance. In doing so, I discover that the understanding of Jesus’ entire life and mission (and its significance for the transformation of society), unfolds within three aspects: his *relationship* with the Father and other human beings, the empowerment of his *agency* as an outflow of this relationship, and his commitment to *practices* of solidarity for the good of others.

From this perspective, in the fifth and final section, I delineate in broad strokes the lines of the socially transformative potential of grassroots Christologies here identified. In so doing, my principal goal is to justify why grassroots Christologies demand sustained critical attention if the Church’s proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ, and the theological reflections about this faith, is to become more engaging and transformative in the African context. Simply restated, the main argument of this chapter is: the christological imagination of African Christians, particularly at the grassroots level, has ongoing theological and social significance. That is, it has the potential of making substantial contributions in the African context to the socially transformative aspect of Christian faith.¹

¹ This idea is in line with the intuition and insight that “Christology is about personal and global [social] transformation...[It] is a call to creatively transform our lives and the world [society].” See Bruce G. Epperly, “Transforming Christology” in *Process Theology*, 62-63. Religious historian and theologian, Philip Sheldrake, also argues that Christian (christological) belief and spirituality is inherently concerned with social transformation. It is first, a call to personal transformation, and second, it is a call to Christians “to continue the mission of Jesus to transform the world.” See Philip Sheldrake, “Christian Spirituality and Social Transformation,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1-

This dissertation seeks to contribute positively towards this end, in a work of robust theological reinterpretation and sensitive pastoral analysis, which may serve to elevate the grassroots Christologies to a status that calls for greater, widespread attention. In this way, my account proposes how the grassroots Christologies are to become sources for: (1) enhanced personal relationship with Christ and other human beings, (2) engaged human agency in social and moral contexts, and (3) embodied practices of solidarity, both within and beyond ecclesial communities.

1. The Quest for a Transformative Christology

1.1. Why Beginning at the Grassroots?

In the general introduction, we charted the theological context of the present research and its relation to existing scholarship. Therein, we highlighted a problem that needs to be addressed in the investigation of the connection between belief in Jesus Christ and the Christian commitment to the transformation of societies in Africa. This problem has to do with the relatively marginal attention to the experience and expressions of Christ's identity and work in the grassroots Christian communities; and the challenge this poses to actualizing the socially transformative potential of the christological imagination of African Christian consciousness – to realign it with efforts to bring about a transformed society. The British-African missionary and theologian, Aylward Shorter, once expressed this problematic. In his words,

“Christology in Africa has hitherto belonged to an ideological sphere. It has been the product of scholars working in the libraries of universities and seminaries. It has been a notional theology and not couched (to use John Henry Newman's terminology) in the grammar of real assent – the imaginative expression of popular faith.”²

Shorter's idea could also explain why little progress has been made in bringing the fruits of scholars' christological engagement to bear on the corresponding social realities, from which most scholars nevertheless claim to draw in their reflections and writings.³ Consequently, this chapter takes such a limitation into account, beginning with an explanation as to why we need to return to the grassroots in the quest for a social transformation-oriented Christology. Other questions I seek to address include, why it is important to consider the grassroots Christian communities as the *primary* locus in this exploration of how christological belief can shape Christians' conduct in everyday life.

33, at 2, 17-21, <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view> [accessed January 25, 2019]. See also Roger Haight, “Spirituality and Social Justice: A Christological Perspective,” *Spirituality Today* 34, no. 4 (1982): 312-325, <https://opcentral.org/resources/2015/01/12/roger-haight-spirituality-and-social-justice-a-christological-perspective/> [accessed August 15, 2019].

² Aylward Shorter, “Folk Christianity and Functional Christology,” *African Ecclesial Review* 24, no. 3 (1982): 133-137, at 135.

³ For some of these works, see the presentation on the scholarly context of the present research, precisely within the field of contemporary African Christology, pages 7-10, *supra*.

How the belief can have a bearing on the social behaviour of Christians towards one another, thereby contributing more effectively to the transformation of societies in Africa.⁴

I suggest two reasons for beginning at the grassroots, drawing from (1) the example of Christ himself in the Gospel, and (2) the ecclesiological principle of *sensus fidelium*. Together, these two reasons substantiate the fact that the experience of Christ and of his transforming presence and act, originate in and flow from the hearts of believers, and not simply in the minds of theologians. And that it takes the heart, our *kardia*, as affective believers, to bring about life-transforming conditions at the individual and communal levels.⁵ So, giving credence to the concrete social situation where faith in Jesus Christ is borne, wrestled with, lived, and carried forward, is an indispensable part of the task of critically discerning, articulating, and recommending a christological vision that can lead to social transformation.

That said, regarding the first reason given above, there is something of an illumination found in Jesus' approach, which calls for a kind of *ressourcement* or a return to the grassroots Christian communities as the primary locus of christologizing for social transformation. Jesus' approach provides inspiration as to why beginning at the grassroots matters in investigating the outlines of a christological perspective that can adequately contribute to the thinking about, and inspiring a new commitment to, social transformation in Africa and elsewhere. This insight is found within the context of the encounter between Jesus and his disciples in his own search for the knowledge of his identity, and consequently, of his mission.

“Who do *people* say that the Son of Man is?” was the very first question Jesus posed to his disciples concerning his person, and accordingly, his ministry (Mt 16:13; Mk 8:27; Lk 9:18).⁶ Most theological thinking by scholars about the transformative relevance of the person and work of Jesus Christ and of faith in him is often seen as mainly responding, wittingly or unwittingly, to the second question within the same gospel pericope – “Who do *you* say I am?” (Mt 16:15; Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20). There is no doubt the two questions could be held as closely related. Yet, it should neither be underestimated, nor taken for granted, that Jesus' question about who he is and what he does begins from an engagement with the testimony of the *people*.

As it happens, what we find in most christological reflections are the portrayals of Jesus which emerge as a response to the second question. They are much more like the personal projections and subjective constructions of each and every individual theologian.

⁴ For a similar turn to, and emphasis on, the grassroots communities and their “potential for making a significant contribution to liberation” and social transformation in Africa, see Peter J. Henriot, “Grassroots Analysis: The Emphasis on Culture,” in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. Georges De Schrijver (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 333-350. See also Jacques Van Nieuwenhove and Berma Klein Goldewijk, eds., *Popular Religion, Liberation and Contextual Theology (Papers from a Congress – January 3-7, 1990, Nijmegen, the Netherlands) Dedicated to Arnulf Camps OFM*, Kerk en Theologie in Context 8 (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1991), 52-60, 70-79, 80-90.

⁵ Of course, this does not do away with the sublime and non-negotiable work of the mind, or the need for putting all one's intellect into elaborating a christological vision that grounds the promotion of human-wellbeing, and that will help in the effort to build a just and humane society in Africa.

⁶ Unless noted, all quotations from the Scriptures in this work are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989). Hereafter, NRSV.

Joseph Ratzinger and Rudolf Schnackenburg, for example, have reflected on these tendencies. In their reflections they critique the often individualistic and rationalistic Christologies of scholars, drawing on their implications for the Christians' appropriation of Christ within their faith communities and in their everyday life. According to Ratzinger, many of the christological constructions by theologians, in their representation of Jesus, "far from uncovering an icon that has become obscured over time, they are much more like photographs of their authors and the ideals they hold."⁷ He argues that this has led to a growing skepticism about the figure of Jesus, with the consequence that the figure "has receded further into the distance."⁸ I shall come back shortly to Ratzinger's incisive response to this problem, given at one of his general audiences.

For his part, Schnackenburg maintains that, the christological responses which have arisen from the effort by many theologians to answer the (second) question of Jesus about his identity, have made ordinary believing Christians insecure. He says that this is due to the undue emphasis on and overly recourse to "scientific research and critical discussion" by theologians, who in the end come up with their own perception and projections about Christ.⁹ Hence, Schnackenburg rightly observes that this question of Jesus, which starts from the people's testimony, ultimately places a demand for a continuous attention to the believing Christians in their confession about Jesus Christ. Such attention, he maintains, sustains the vitality of faith in Jesus Christ who is never a passive object to be explored, but rather the *One* who remains the Saviour of humankind, the final criterion of discipleship, and the fullness of God's reality animating Christian existence. Thus, in line with my research orientation, Schnackenburg himself also views such living faith as a principal form of transformative commitment not only to Christ himself, but also to others, and to the social order.

As regards the second reason for the task of returning to the grassroots level, as our foundational starting point for lived Christology, precisely where the people of God are is also in line with the idea of the *sensus fidei* (sense of faith). This is articulated in the document of the Second Vatican Council, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. In paragraph twelve, the Council Fathers declare:

"The holy people of God share also in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity. ... The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith.... That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. Through it, the people of God adhere unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life."¹⁰

⁷ See Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2007), xii-xiii.

⁸ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xiii.

⁹ See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), x.

¹⁰ Vatican Council II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November, 1964," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman Tanner, vol. 2 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), no. 12. Hereafter, *Lumen Gentium*. Emphasis mine. Also, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) no. 93.

Pope Benedict XVI's remarks also support our argument for regarding the experiences of faith and hope in Jesus Christ at the grassroots level as the primary locus for a christological investigation that can bear positively on the social situation of many Africans. According to the Pope:

“The People of God precede theologians, and this, all thanks to that supernatural *sensus fidei*, namely, that capacity infused by the Holy Spirit that qualifies us to embrace the reality of the faith with humility of heart and mind. In this sense, the People of God is the “teacher that goes first” and must then be more deeply examined and intellectually accepted by theology. May theologians always be ready to listen to this source of faith and retain the humility and simplicity of children.”¹¹

This is to say, who the ordinary Christians believe and proclaim Jesus is, and what he does or can do, should be taken seriously, and can never be cast aside. The experience and confession of Christ as “true God and true man” is always the fruit of the life and worship of a believing community. This precedes any theological investigation, systematization, and reconstruction. The faith encounter and the hope-filled longing of Christians at the grassroots ought to be appreciated and integrated always as an important formative and transformative element. Therefore, the christological venture of connecting Christ to social transformation in Africa should open us more to the lived experience and proclamation of Christ, particularly in the grassroots communities. They are the living places of faith, hope and love, where the ever-present reality and transforming power of Jesus Christ “for real embodied human beings is affirmed unhesitatingly and daily, by confession and practice.”¹²

Walter Kasper makes the same point well, stated in more philosophical terms, writing that, “the starting-point of Christology is the *phenomenology* of faith in Christ; faith as it is actually believed, lived, proclaimed and practiced in the Christian churches, in the *encounter* with believing communities.”¹³ This can also be said even of the task of working out the relation between christological belief and societal transformation. It is within the context of such communities that the life and work of Christ could become embodied, engaged, and enacted as the *event* for social transformation. I shall return to this idea at length in the last chapter of this dissertation.

A further observation could be made in the light of the ecclesiological principle of *sensus fidelium*. This point also ties in with the biblical pointer to the need to begin at the grassroots. It is about the profoundly ecclesial-social character of this starting point, that I have already been highlighting and needs to be spelt out more. It could be said that Jesus' initial turn to the people in that quest for his own self-definition signals a deference to the ecclesial-social dimension and the outward directedness of his entire life and ministry. It has a deeper significance for Christian formation and discipleship. As the North American process theologian, Bruce Epperly, rightly observes:

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *John Duns Scotus*, General Audience, Wednesday, 7 July 2010. www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100707.html [accessed August 22, 2018]. See also the recent study by Bradford Hinze and Peter Phan, eds., *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

¹² Davies, Janz, and Sedmak, *Transformation Theology*, 3.

¹³ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 16. Emphasis mine.

“When Jesus asked his followers, first, “who do persons say that I am?” and, then, “who do you say that I am?” he was, in effect asking them, “In what ways will you shape your lives around your understanding of my life and message?” When the Prologue of John’s gospel (John 1:1-18) affirms that Jesus Christ reveals God’s nature, it invites people to live in accordance with Jesus’ pathway of healing, love, and individual and *social transformation*.”¹⁴

This ecclesial-social significance of beginning at the grassroots in the search for a transformative Christology in Africa and elsewhere was underlined vividly by Jean Marc Éla.¹⁵ In his response to the question “where do we begin?” in the “search for the experiences of faith” and its transformative relevance in Africa, Éla asserted that “it must be at the grassroots.”¹⁶ “The search for faith and experiences of faith,” according to him, “must find its roots in local communities.”¹⁷ Éla further explains:

“Faith touches on the totality of existence and all of its problems. Thus, when faith seeks to understand itself, to verify itself and to account for itself in Africa, it must begin with the people’s struggle to escape from the hellish circle in which they risk being permanently imprisoned... Africans are more and more preoccupied by social problems; the challenges of daily life crowd in on believers. We must look at faith, then, at the ground level and clarify the paths faith can take in the structures of daily life.”¹⁸

Therefore, “any question related to the Christian faith and the transformation of African society...cannot be separated from reflection on the life of the people of God.”¹⁹ What this implies is that a critical and an all-embracing theological investigation of the meaning and significance of the reality of Christ “must refer to the church as the place where Christians ask questions and where people hear the Word of God” in the light of their history, their world, and their concrete social conditions.²⁰ The hypothesis of the present research suggests that an empathetic-critical observation shows that urgent social issues like curable illnesses, unbearable poverty, and rampant social injustice experienced by many people at the grassroots in the context of Africa, prompt particular images of Christ in the Christian and theological landscape.²¹ Diane Stinton, drawing upon her experience with Christians at the grassroots level, concludes that, “as these christological images are adopted in contemporary Christian reflection and praxis, they serve to redress the very issues that prompted their formulation.”²² Hence, any inclusive or “whole” and “living” Christology, to use words from Brian Sanders, and Éla, once again, “must consider the most compelling issues, important concerns, and valid requests coming from communities

¹⁴ Epperly, “Transforming Christology,” in *Process Theology*, 62. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as An African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 24-26, 55, 143-145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 143, 65. Éla further discusses this idea in the second part of his corpus entitled “Faith at the Grassroots.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24, 55. See also Éla’s discussion of “A Theology Coming from the People,” in *My Faith as an African*, 174-177.

²⁰ Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 174-177.

²¹ See the General Introduction to the present research, pages 4-5.

²² Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 251.

of faith.”²³ Similar socio-theological perspectives are shared by Botswana feminist theologian, Musa Dube, on the significance of beginning from, and taking seriously who the people say that Christ is. As Dube articulates her position,

“The people who had heard Jesus and followed his ministry...saw Jesus as one who called people to rectify their relationship with God and with each other...and called for healthy and just social relationship between different groups and classes with God. This expectation took diverse forms, but one thing was central to the belief and meaning of the expected ‘Christ’: it was linked to justice and liberation.”²⁴

From all that we have said above about the grassroots Christian communities as the primary locus of a transformative Christology in the social context of Africa, we now come to the point where it becomes possible for me to fill out the conditions for the pursuit and possibility of such a Christology. I referred earlier in this dissertation to the work of Michael Cook, a Jesuit systematic theologian. His article, which I rely on for this purpose, offers an analysis of the conditions.²⁵ The first condition is the provision of an in-depth theological account – in light of the social dimension – of popular expressions of Christ’s identity and work within the grassroots Christian communities. For Cook, this theological account entails a “repristination” of the *people’s* christological *imagination*, which is further expressed in *images* informed by their day-to-day struggles and hope for a transformed society.²⁶ Repristination means the valuing of grassroots (popular) images of Christ for themselves, and as having theological significance. This valuing act also demands bringing the christological images to expression in new and creative ways, for engaging and responding to the pressing social issues in Africa.²⁷ This leads to the second condition.

This second condition involves a critical appropriation and incorporation of the *popular* expressions of the identity and work of Christ into the theologian’s ‘constructive’ christological model. The model should be the kind that primes the christological imagination of the ordinary believers. It should be able to enhance their relationship with Christ and with one another, open the way to an engaged and empowered human agency, orient them to confront their social realities, and very importantly, inspire specific commitments of ecclesial-social solidarity. This second condition or process resonates with

²³ Brian Sanders, *Christology, Missiology, and the Poor: Exploring the Connection Between Knowing Jesus and Doing Mission* (Tampa, FL: Underground Media, 2011), 1, 75-79. Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 55.

²⁴ Musa W. Dube, “Who Do You Say I Am?,” *Feminist Theology* 15, no. 3 (2007): 346-367, at 346. Emphasis mine.

²⁵ See Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 668-692. Cook is a professor of Systematic theology with specialization in Christology. He has extensive experience in Africa. As a matter of fact, the article was a fruit of his one year sabbatical at Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2007-2008. He had discussed similar idea in an earlier article “Jesus from the Other Side of History: Christology in Latin America,” *Theological Studies* 44 (1983): 258-287.

²⁶ It is important to keep in mind the highlighted words – *people*, *imagination* and *images*. They provide both the embodied and epistemic framework for making further sense of the main thesis of this chapter and of the entire dissertation, as already stated: that the christological experiences and expressions of Christians in Africa have a potential for social transformation through socio-critical discipleship and solidarity within and outside of ecclesial communities.

²⁷ Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 669, 679, and 682.

what Cook refers to as “conscientization” in the same article already cited.²⁸ According to him, “conscientization” entails the “critical appropriation” of those images “through a specific politico-communal commitment.”²⁹ Cook maintains that this second condition saves the first from being “romanticized or idealized.”³⁰ It is important to note here that, these conditions are underlying the investigation of the grassroots Christologies in this chapter. The second condition lies behind the examination of the model of Christ’s existence as “incarnate divinity” in the third chapter, and the implications of the model for Christian life and commitment to social transformation in the fourth chapter of the dissertation.

I would like to close this section by offering a brief description of what I mean by grassroots Christologies, which some scholars of African Christianity are wont to describe or sometimes (mis)construe as “forms and vagaries of enchanted Christianity,” “rhetoric of God’s empowerment,” or as mere “solution-oriented Christologies.”³¹ The aim of doing this is to also distinguish the understanding of grassroots Christologies from certain limited notions in which they are presented some scholarly circles.

1.2. Description of Grassroots Christologies

By grassroots Christologies I mean what many *people* – whether they are simply ordinary Christians or Christians who have had any formal academic (theological) training – think, believe, and confess about Jesus Christ within the African Christian and social context.³² Grassroots Christologies are expressions of the identity and work of Jesus Christ that are

²⁸ Ibid., 672, and earlier in his book *Christology as Narrative Quest* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 179-180.

²⁹ Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 672.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ For such views, see for example, Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 13-28, 107-124. See also Victor Ezigbo, “Rhetoric of God’s Empowerment in Nigerian Christianity: Its Import for Christian Identity and Social Responsibility,” *Journal of Third World Studies* 32 (2015): 199-220; and Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 103, 294-295.

³² I am aware that the category “people” can be an ambiguous term. Kathryn Tanner shares similar view when she writes that, “‘people’ is a collective term with a loose and shifting reference that may span or cross in complex ways common factors of social division.” See Kathryn Tanner, “Theology and Popular Culture,” in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 101-122, and for this, 119. But as the Argentine Jesuit systematic theologian, Juan Carlos Scannone rightly expresses, the ambiguity is “not for its vacuity but for its wealth of meaning.” For Scannone, “on the one hand, it can designate the entire people as a nation; on the other hand, it can designate the lower classes and popular social sectors that comprise a nation.” For the purpose of this research, “people” is used and understood in the first sense. In this sense, the term connotes the plural unity of persons and communities that are “rooted in a common history, and projected forward toward a shared goal, namely, the common good” in terms of societal transformation for the flourishing of each and every human person. See Juan Carlos Scannone, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016), 121. See also the insightful articles in Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez and Po-Ho Huang, eds., *Wisdom and the People’s Theology, Concilium* 3 (London: SCM Press, 2018). Thence, my reference to people is not in the mere sociological sense as sometimes referred to “in opposition to the elites who do make up the power-bloc on the grounds of a marked difference in social, economic, political, and cultural influence.” See Tanner, “Theology and Popular Culture,” 119.

found mainly within the community of believers, and in the course of their daily living.³³ They are the people's expression of their simple understanding of the transcendence and immanence of Christ in certain embodied images. Such christological images could be seen as concretizations of the creedal formulation of Christ's identity as "true God and true man." It is, of course, important to note here that I have not carried out any quantitative empirical research on the grassroots christological beliefs or confession in the African context. Rather I rely mostly on the many recent and extensive sociological-theological works, authored by many contemporary scholars, in order to find out what Christians at the grassroots believe about Jesus Christ and what sorts of images they have of him.³⁴

Within the context of the present research that focuses on the African context, grassroots Christologies could be described as "contextual" interpretations and appropriations of the meaning and impact of the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Kwame Bediako, a Ghanaian theologian, refers to grassroots Christologies as "lived Christology."³⁵ Bediako further explains that, as lived Christology, grassroots Christologies are "the voices of the African Christians, individuals and communities of faith, living their experiences of Christ in the day-to-day realities and challenges of life."³⁶ Granted that some of the images of Christ we shall examine in this chapter are obviously biblical images, the focus here remains how Christians in Africa understand and appropriate those images in their struggle for faith and for human well-being, which their faith dictates.

Drawing on the definition by Bediako, Diane Stinton emphasizes that, grassroots Christologies "are, in essence, 'Christologies of the people,'" for they are related with the experiences and aspirations of the people.³⁷ By experiences, Stinton means both the

³³ Diane Stinton, "Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology," in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, ed. T. Merrigan and J. Haers, BETL 152 (Leuven: University Press and Peeters, 2000), 287.

³⁴ Some of the main works that I shall rely extensively on in this chapter are: Donald J. Goergen, "The Quest for the Christ of Africa," *African Christian Studies* 17 (2001): 5-51; Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), and also some of her in-depth articles and essays, "Jesus–Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God: Aspects of Popular Christology in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1 (2007): 6-40; "Encountering Jesus at the Well: Further Reflections on African Women's Christologies," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 7 (2013): 267-293; "Jesus Christ, Living Water in Africa Today," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 425-443; Ezigbo, *Re-imagining African Christologies*, 103-142; Clifton R. Clarke, *African Christology: Jesus in Post-missionary African Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011); Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: C. Hurst & C. Publishers Ltd., 2015). There are others like: Carl Sundberg, *Conversion and Contextual Conceptions of Christ: A Missiological Study among Young Converts in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 2000); Elna Mouton and Dirkie Smit, "Jesus in South Africa—Lost in Translation?" *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009): 247-273.

³⁵ Kwame Bediako, "Guest Editorial: Lived Christology," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 8, no. 1 (2005): 1.

³⁶ Bediako, "Lived Christology," 1. For a further description of grassroots Christologies along the lines of Bediako's idea, see Efoé Julien Pénoukou, "Christology in the Village," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 24-51.

³⁷ Stinton, "Jesus–Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God: Aspects of Popular Christology in Sub-Saharan Africa," 8. See also Melanio LaGuardia Aonan, "Transforming Christology in a Changing Church and Society," *CTC Bulletin* 13, no. 3 (1995): 32-42, at 33. Citing Eleazar Fernandez, a Filipino theologian, Aonan maintains that grassroots Christologies help to illuminate the people's struggle for true humanity and peoplehood." See Eleazar Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 98.

religious experience, or what I sometimes refer to as the faith experience, and the experience of human existence and living in their particular social situation. Aspirations here refers to would mean the longing of the people for the ‘result’ or manifestation of this faith experience in the form of a transformed society that promotes a more liveable humanity. In short: they point to the experience of human suffering and the aspiration for abundant life. Hence, one could argue that christological belief in Africa is at the same time a proclamation of faith and a longing for human flourishing in a transformed society.

I should add that Stinton’s description of the grassroots Christologies as the Christologies of the people resonates with Kathryn Tanner’s “theologies of the people.”³⁸ Stinton refers to Tanner on this idea, as well. According to Tanner, the theologies (Christologies) of the people are articulated in relation to the actualities of life, lived experiences, and concrete human situations of Christians (and non-Christians), especially within ecclesial-social communities. Such views arise from the existential construct of faith in Jesus Christ, in who he was and is, and what he has done and does amongst Christians in a given context. The expressions of this christological belief are the outcome of a living hermeneutical act by the people themselves. That is why, for Tanner, popular theologies – or in our case, grassroots Christologies – are “more often than not, fully embedded in the religious practices and lived relations of those who, with reference to intellectual training, social standing, economic attainment or institutional position, cannot be counted among the elites of church and society.”³⁹

The above explanation by Tanner points to why the sources and methods of the grassroots Christologies are not limited to the biblical revelation and traditional creedal formulations, as normative and as important as these are.⁴⁰ Tanner underlines the fact that grassroots Christologies are “without much textual or even extended verbal expression.”⁴¹ That is to say, grassroots Christologies “go beyond formal written expressions to include informal expressions, for example, in worship, prayer, preaching, artwork, drama, gesture, and symbols.”⁴² This idea is corroborated by the Nigerian theologian and ecclesiastic, Cardinal John Onaiyekan. Onaiyekan asserts that, “what the African is saying about Christ is not to be found only in the books and articles published by the few.”⁴³ He maintains that, “we must, in characteristic African fashion, listen to the oral expressions of the people:

³⁸ Tanner, “Theology and Popular Culture,” 101.

³⁹ Ibid. I appreciate Tanner’s description of the theologies or the Christologies of the people, and have referred to it for my aim in this section. But I have some reservations about the somewhat one-sided account of the popular theologies or Christologies as being proper to only the marginalized or to people who, according to Tanner, are distanced “from the legitimation that the complex intersection of a number of different factors such as ordination, academic degree, or privileged social location might confer.” I have distinguished the sense in which I use the term people or popular above. See footnote reference no. 32, *supra*.

⁴⁰ I shall still engage with them in the third section of this chapter.

⁴¹ Tanner, “Theology and Popular Culture,” 101.

⁴² Ezigbo, *Re-imagining African Christologies*, 104-105. See also Clifton Clarke, “African Epistemology and the Christian Faith: Towards the Epistemic Use of Orality and Symbolism in African Christian Scholarship,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 9, no. 1 (2006): 56-64. See also Clifton Clarke, “Towards an Oral Christology among African Indigenous Church in Ghana,” *Journal of Asian Missions* 6 (2004): 245-264.

⁴³ John Onaiyekan, “Christological Trends in Contemporary African Theology,” in *Constructive Christian Theology in Worldwide Church*, ed. William R. Barr (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 355-368, at 358.

their hymns, sermons, and proverbs.”⁴⁴ Onaiyekan refers to his own experiences of having “heard some of the most profound christological insights from the mouths of poor illiterates, rich in nothing but their deep faith in Christ.”⁴⁵ Therefore, he insists that, “the African theologian must count among his primary tasks the effort to listen to, and speak on behalf of our people as they express their life in Christ in the daily circumstances of their lives.”⁴⁶

Fulfilling such a task is also my goal in this chapter. I try to bring to fore how Christ is experienced and expressed at the grassroots level in African Christianity. More to this task is to evaluate how the experience and the expressions of Christ in certain images, at that level, relate to the urgent quest for social transformation in Africa. I believe that if we have a greater clarity about the meaning and function of Christ’s identity and work there, we may be able to remedy the deficiencies of grassroots christological imagination in the quest for social transformation. This proposed solution will enable us to disclose more adequately the potential of christological belief and to realign it with the shared efforts toward bringing about a transformed society.

A further point bears mentioning in our explanation of grassroots Christologies. It is the fact that the images of Christ in the grassroots Christian communities, wittingly or unwittingly, could be traced even in the so-called constructive (academic) Christologies.⁴⁷ Once again, Tanner underlines the fact that, “there is little point in trying to distinguish popular and elite forms of belief and practice according to content.”⁴⁸ This is because, there is likely considerable overlap between perceptions and practices of ordinary people and academic theologians.⁴⁹ As I mentioned already and also argue elsewhere, “the experience of Christ (and of his transforming presence and power) originate in the hearts of believers, not simply in the minds of theologians.”⁵⁰ Therefore, grassroots can also receive expressions in the works of academic theologians. The expressions, however, should be

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Onaiyekan’s insistence is not new. Henry Okullu had upheld such a view in his explanation of the fundamental criterion for the development of African Christology. In the search for African Christology, a transformative one at that, Okullu opined that, “we should go first to the fields, to the village church, to Christian homes to listen to those spontaneously uttered prayers before people go to bed. ... We must listen to the throbbing drumbeats and the clapping of hands accompanying the impromptu singing in the independent churches. We must look at the way in which faith in Christ is being planted in Africa through music, drama, songs, dances, art, paintings. We must listen to the preaching of the sophisticated pastor as well as that of the simple village vicar.” Then Okullu asks a pointed question, “can it be that all this is an empty show?,” “It is impossible,” he responds. Henry Okullu, *Church and Politics in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press Limited, 1974), 53-54, cited in Stinton, “Jesus – Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God: Aspects of Popular Christology in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 8.

⁴⁷ Bediako asserts in another work that, grassroots Christology “is an abiding element of all theology (Christology), and therefore one that is essential for academic theology to be in touch with, listen to, share in, and to learn from, but never to replace.” Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Carlisle: Regnum Books International, 2000), 17.

⁴⁸ Tanner, “Theology and Popular Culture,” 107.

⁴⁹ Tanner, “Theology and Popular Culture,” 107. As also referred to in Stinton, “Jesus–Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God,” 9.

⁵⁰ Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, “Christology ‘From Within’: Exploring the Locus and Framework of a Socially Transformative Christology in Africa,” (article under review, *Journal of Reformed Theology*).

from the vantage position of the living faith and hope of ordinary Christians and their communities.⁵¹

To conclude, my descriptions of grassroots Christologies are in contrast to the limited notions about them in the works of some recent scholars of (African) Christianity.⁵² Such ideologically reductionist ways of thinking about grassroots Christianity (Christologies) are clearly to be avoided in this research. From the descriptions given, it becomes possible to look at the question of what framework helps in shedding light on how grassroots Christologies relate to the quest for societal transformation. The theoretical-practical framework, imagination and image, might be helpful in this regard. Explaining, as a sort of grammatical clearing of ground, the sense in which they are used in the present research – that is, their meanings and the nature of their function – is what follows immediately in the section below.

2. (Re-)Mapping the Conceptual Framework

My exploration of how the reality of Christ is experienced and expressed in the African Christian (theological) and social landscape will be carried out within a particular framework – imagination and image. The framework has sometimes been employed in contemporary African Christology, but in a very limited (overly notional) manner.⁵³ Besides, there has been no systematic, or even thematic and theological clarification of the categories in African Christology today, for appreciating the unique way Christ is still being encountered, and faith in him professed. Nor has there been any general treatment of how

⁵¹ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 103-117. See also Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 69.

⁵² For an example of an understanding of grassroots ecclesial communities as sociological, political or ideological movements, see G.C. Oosthuizen, M.C. Kitshoff and S.W.D. Dude, eds., *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots: Its Dynamics and Strategies* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994). Michael Kitshoff, for example, describes the history of grassroots Christian experience of Independent Churches in Africa as a process of “ideological liberalism” of the nineteenth century. According to Kitshoff, the phenomenon of grassroots Christian movement “cannot be understood without reference to the ideological environment of the nineteenth century.” By this historical analysis and the conclusions drawn therefrom, Kitshoff suggests, as many of the contributors to the work also infer, that, grassroots Christianity, at its best, could be understood as a form of ideological construct, sociological movement, and political activism. See M.C. Kitshoff, “Between Mainlinism and Independentism: A Case Study of An Early Secession,” in *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots*, 3-15. For a similar idea about grassroots Christianity and Churches, see John Burdick and W.E. Hewitt, eds., *The Church at the Grassroots in Latin America: Perspectives on Thirty Years of Activism* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000).

⁵³ For example, Nigerian theologian, Victor Ezigbo, whose works I have mentioned and will review in greater detail in the next chapter, titles his book *Re-Imagining African Christologies*. In using the word “re-imagining,” Ezigbo implies that “imagining” Christ’s identity and work is what is done in the grassroots and constructive Christologies. See Ezigbo, “Jesus-Talk in Contemporary African Christianity,” in *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 54-140. From this view, Ezigbo considers that the main task and goal in his own work is to revise the grassroots and constructive Christologies, which he argues are dominantly “solution-oriented Christologies.” And so, he uses the word “re-imagination.” With it, he claims to offer a ‘new’ understanding of the reality and significance of Christ in Africa. It seems to me that Ezigbo’s use of the word “(re)imagination,” and the way in which he does so in the light of his “Revealer” christological model, tends to render the reality of Jesus Christ as a mere concept. This makes his christological reflections appear somewhat abstract. I shall return to this issue in due course, in sub-section 3.4 of chapter 2, where I offer a critical appraisal of the reconstructionist christological approach to social transformation.

“imagination” can and does effect socially transformative action, and, in turn, social change. To be fair, the Congolese philosophical theologian, Kā Mana, is a notable exception. Mana uses the word imagination quite extensively in most of his works.⁵⁴ In them, he speaks of African *imaginaire*, a French word that comes close to imagination, but which he describes in mainly “psycho-anthropological” terms, and not as a profoundly theological or christological category.⁵⁵ Hence, before examining some of the popular images of Christ and interacting more directly with the sources that inform them, it may be useful to preface it with remarks about my preference for christological *imagination and image*, and subsequently, the sense in which I use them.⁵⁶

I speak of christological image rather than title, name or symbol even though these expressions are sometimes used interchangeably by some theologians in discussions of the figure of Jesus.⁵⁷ There are good reasons for my preference, which I hope will become clear in the course of my clarification.⁵⁸ Suffice to say for the moment that this framework is in line with the pitch of the present research, entitled “Christ the *Image* of Social Transformation.” Hopefully, it will provide a crucial basis for us as we pursue our objective both in this chapter and in the presentation of research in what follows. Speaking of image and imagination might help us to designate specific interfaces of meaning in the production, structure, and operation of grassroots Christologies in particular, and even of christological belief in general. The meaning includes the relational, interactive, communal, formative, and very importantly, practical character that should be proper to belief in and the proclamation of Christ. For the purpose of this conceptual elucidation, I will be drawing upon the Thomistic insights, synthesized by the Jesuit systematic theologian Roger Haight, in his discussion of “Jesus Research, Faith in Jesus, and the Imagination.”⁵⁹ However, as I proceed in the clarification of the framework, significant insights from other theologians on the concept of imagination and image in relation to faith in Jesus Christ, and the import of belief in him for life in society, will be slightly adduced.

⁵⁴ I shall also engage with some of the works in the next chapter.

⁵⁵ There is an extensive research article that offers a good introduction to Mana’s works. The article provides an explanation of Mana’s use of the concept of *imaginaire* as “the entire constellation of beliefs, patterns of thought or the inner drive that motivates one’s social behaviour.” See Valentin Dedji, “The Ethical Redemption of African Imaginaire: Kā Mana’s Theology of Reconstruction,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31 (2001): 254-274, at 254 and 272.

⁵⁶ In some works, authors capitalize Image when referring to the name and person of Christ, but leave it in lower case when referring to the simple idea of image as a concept. In order to avoid unnecessary ambiguity, in this research, I use the two, Image and image, interchangeably, in referring to the one and the same subject of the African Christian belief and understanding – Jesus Christ.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the figure of Jesus Christ with abundant references to authors who have employed these forms of reference – images, names, titles, and/or symbols – interchangeably in their presentation of Jesus Christ, see Ben Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Quest for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

⁵⁸ In offering the reasons for my choice of image, I share the basic assumption of Jon Sobrino in his discussion of the “riches and dangers of christological titles.” Sobrino argues that, “it is impossible to systematize the Christology of the New Testament from titles..., since titles operate as theoretical models for conceptualizing the reality of Jesus.” He suggests that, “images” allow for existential formulation, and so, “the practical importance and perennial significance of the identity and work of Jesus Christ. See Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 117-123.

⁵⁹ See Roger Haight, *The Future of Christology* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2005), 13-31.

2.1. Christological Imagination: The Experience of Christ

It is beyond the scope of the present research to enter into a detailed inventory of the concept, and the meaning the term – imagination – has received in the history of thought. My purpose is not so much to engage the various meanings of imagination as to highlight a number of ideas that are relevant to its use in the present research.

Thomas Aquinas considered imagination to be that inner power of the human spirit that accumulates the material or “concrete sensible images,” which are received through external senses and perceptions.⁶⁰ Hence, imagination is the link between sensory and intellectual knowledge, between the real and the notional.⁶¹ It “has its own creative force,” and “guarantees the receptive character of thought because it is an expressive result of *participation in reality*.”⁶² Given this creative and participatory potency of human imagination, it has, as Aquinas puts it, “a passive and an active dimension.”⁶³ It is passive in the sense that it receives and stores images of the external world and of historical reality.⁶⁴ It is active in the sense that it divides and combines the received images and constructs new ones.⁶⁵ This explains why human imagination could be said to have two functions, which are “conservative” and “creative” functions.⁶⁶

Explaining this Thomistic understanding of imagination, Haight indicates how “the passive storing of images to which all knowledge is bound keeps our speculative reasoning in touch with reality; and as such, it prevents imagination from becoming fancy and fantasy.”⁶⁷ So my use of imagination for articulating the African experience of Jesus forecloses the idea of mere speculation and abstraction. The active dimension of imagination is “the principle of creative discovery and invention in poetry, in art, and in the breakthroughs of science.”⁶⁸ To this list, one must add certain aspects representing a creative redeployment of historical reality even in domains of religious belief and practices. Thus, not only does human imagination perform these two functions, it “always has to find a balance between receptivity and construction.”⁶⁹ How might these insights help in understanding the African experience of Christ as a living reality in their particular social context?

Jon Sobrino, who Haight also refers to in order to describe the role of imagination in the experience of Jesus Christ, can help us begin to articulate a comprehensive answer. According to Sobrino, imagination is the specific way – the “practice of (and with the)

⁶⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes* (hereafter, *ST*), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1961): Part I, Question 78, Article 4, cited in Roger Haight, *The Future of Christology*, 16.

⁶¹ Stephan van Erp, “*Fides quaerens imagines*: Faith seeking forms [images],” in *The Art of Theology: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics and the Foundation of Faith*, Studies in Philosophical Theology 25 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 242-254, at 248 and 254.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 248-249. Emphasis mine.

⁶³ *ST*, I, 78, 4, cited in Haight, *The Future of Christology*, 17.

⁶⁴ Haight, *The Future of Christology*, 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Van Erp, *The Art of Theology*, 249.

spirit” – by which a Christian or a community of believers go back and forth to the history of Jesus – the words, actions, attitudes, and whole range of activities that make up his history, which Jesus himself “used to act on social reality and transform it in specific direction of the Kingdom of God.”⁷⁰ Sobrino’s description correctly points to the performative and transformative value of christological imagination. These were captured by the African missionary, Aylward Shorter, who says that faith in Jesus Christ, particularly in Africa, “takes on an imaginative form and expression.”⁷¹ Which is why “the essence of reality can only be successfully expressed through images, because they are instances of its experience.”⁷² The reality we speak of here is Christ. Thus, christological imagination constitutes a web of meaning embodied in images and possible behavioural responses and norms.⁷³ For Shorter, such theological expressions concern a pattern of human thought, disposition (a word Sobrino also uses to describe the spirituality underlying christological belief), and actions.⁷⁴ They provide the prism through which the African Christians also view and try to make sense of their experience, domestic, political, social, economic and religious.⁷⁵

The crucial question in all these is then: what enables a Christian or a believing community to have this real and living experience of Christ, that is, to *imagine* Christ as such? A sufficient response remains beyond the present scope, yet here I am prepared to offer at least some clarifying remarks. Christological imagination is not enabled simply by the fact of the Christians’ innate capacity to do so, or simply by the “inner power of the human spirit,” to use the Thomistic phrase. Rather christological imagination as such is made possible through the particular historical event of Jesus of Nazareth: the Christ event.⁷⁶ That is why christological imagination is one that is able “to communicate presence and individuate relationship.”⁷⁷ This is so, as Sandra Schneiders puts it, because it is intrinsically connected to and grounded in “the paschal imagination.”⁷⁸ By “paschal imagination,” Schneiders means the free, creative and constructive process through which the world and the historical experiences behind the New Testament became and becomes

⁷⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 50-51. See also Haight, *The Future of Christology*, 26-28.

⁷¹ Aylward Shorter, *Christianity and the African Imagination: After the African Synod, Resources for Inculturation* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996), 15-25, at 16. See also Shorter, “Folk Christianity and Functional Christology,” 135.

⁷² Shorter, *Christianity and the African Imagination*, 18.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Shorter, *Christianity and the African Imagination*, 16. See also Joseph G. Donders, *Non-Bourgeois Theology: An African Experience of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

⁷⁶ For a fine reflection on “Knowing Christ in Our Imaginations,” see also Alister McGrath, *Knowing Christ* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 33-40. Drawing upon the famous hymn – “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” – by a seventeenth century English Christian Minister, Isaac Watts, McGrath provides an interesting description of how our imaginations are triggered into evoking very real images of Christ that are not only expressive of his identity and work as Saviour, but also offer a window into the historical moments in the life and ministry of Christ. And as such, they (our imaginations) also have the capacity to unlock the potential of the images of Christ to orient not just individuals, but also communities, institutions, and systems at both the cognitive and affective levels.

⁷⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 127.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

transformed so as to give rise to the biblical texts and the christological confessions that one finds in and beyond the texts.⁷⁹ She expresses it as follows:

“What gave rise to the text was not simply the life of the actual earthly Jesus and the first Christian communities but the theological-spiritual imagination of the believing community, which transformed its historical experience into a dynamic *image* of Jesus the Christ as locus of divine revelation. The New Testament text is a product of that paschal imagination.”⁸⁰

These ideas lead me to consider the African experience of Christ as a profoundly christological act: “the total act by which we take hold of a real object,” which also takes hold of us and directs our lives and actions.⁸¹ The real object in this case is Christ, who is the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).

2.2. Christological Image: The Proclamation of Christ

From our description of the African experience of Christ in terms of imagination, it becomes possible to clarify the related framework “image” in connection to christological belief in the context.⁸² The epistle of Paul to the Colossians that we have just cited offers the main source for the Thomistic understanding of “Image” as a proper name of the person of Christ.⁸³ In his *ST* Ia pars, question 35, Aquinas addresses the question whether the title of Image is a proper name for the second person of the Trinity. The question is located within the broader question of “whether image in God is said personally.”⁸⁴ In response to the former question, Aquinas refers to the idea of similitude, which he argues belongs to the definition of image. According to Aquinas, “not just any similitude suffices for the notion (*ratio*) of an image, but a similitude that is in the species of the thing, or at least in some sign of the species.”⁸⁵ This is to say, an image must imitate or share in, or, to borrow a phrase from Schneiders, must “existentially participate” in the essence of that of which it is an image. Hence, “for a thing to be an image, derivation must be added to similarity in

⁷⁹ In an earlier article Schneiders writes that, “the paschal, or Christian [christological], imagination is precisely the concrete effect on the whole cognitive-affective capacity of the person under the influence of the Spirit of Jesus which enables the person to grasp the paschal wholeness and character of the Jesus event and thus enter into an *existential participation* in the mystery of Christ.” Sandra Schneiders, “The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in New Testament Interpretation,” *Theological Studies* 43 (1982):65. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁰ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 127. Emphasis mine. This is not an impersonal or mechanical process. It has to do with a relationship between and among persons, and it consists in the total response of the human spirit to the fully pervasive influence of the Holy Spirit.

⁸¹ For this understanding see Terrence Merrigan, “The Image of the Word: Faith and Imagination in John Henry Newman and John Hick,” in *Newman and the Word*, ed. Terrence Merrigan and Ian T. Ker, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs 27 (Louvain: Peeters, 2000), 34. See also his discussion in the same chapter on “the Religious Imagination and the Image of Christ,” 14-19.

⁸² For my description of “Image,” in this research, I am indebted to Isaac Augustine Morales, “Aquinas’s Christology of the *Imago* and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *Nova et Vetera* 15 (2017): 161-184; and to Diane Stinton, “Jesus – Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God,” 29-37.

Stinton, “

⁸³ Morales, “Aquinas’s Christology of the *Imago*,” 162.

⁸⁴ *ST* I, q. 35, cited in Morales, “Aquinas’s Christology of the *Imago*,” 163.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

form.”⁸⁶ Similarly, participation must be enhanced for an image to become a reality that is fully present, and could become alive to an individual or a community.

At this point we are already able to glimpse into an understanding of faith in Christ, and consequently, the expression of him in *images*. Therefore, from the Thomistic description, two conclusions could be drawn: first, that “Image” must be a *personal name* in God.⁸⁷ This means that image is not simply a referent; it relates to a being. In fact, it is about a person. Second, that the images employed in the Christians’ understanding and appropriation of the identity and work of Jesus Christ, to use the words of John Henry Newman, could more or less be “real apprehension” or “vivid realization” of Christ’s life and deed.⁸⁸ For Stinton, images of Christ are “constructs operating together to express that which lies beyond human expression, namely, the person and work of Jesus Christ as God Incarnate.”⁸⁹ This is why Roger Haight in expressing himself on the christological framework emphasizes in the following terms that: “It is sufficient to say that the New Testament bears witness to various *images* of how Jesus is saviour and how he is to be understood relative to us and our context.”⁹⁰ To drive home the argument, Haight states that, “the classical christological doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon are public *imagination* that tries to refer back to Jesus of Nazareth in response to specific historical problems that were raised in those particular historical contexts.”⁹¹

From this perspective, one can safely maintain, as already mentioned, that christological *image* includes the other terms like title, name, symbol, or portrait. “Image” bears a representative, relational, participatory, formative, performative, and potentially, transformative character. These qualities distinguish it from the exclusive, solitary, and sometimes, merely arbitrary forms of reference to Christ, suggested by the other concepts which tend to serve a more linguistic and epistemological purpose. This idea is expressed by Robert Schreiter: “Images are central to the Christian imagination and sensibility: they convey an array of ideas, feelings, and memories that may elude more abstract conceptualization of who Jesus Christ is for us. Images often shape our identities much more strongly than do concepts.”⁹² As such, they embody a person’s or a community’s cognitive and emotive articulation of their experience and appropriation of Jesus’s personality, and its universal significance, as testified to in the sacred scripture, and further enunciated in the creedal formulations.⁹³ Christological images disclose a people’s

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 164. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁸ Merrigan, “The Image of the Word,” 9.

⁸⁹ Stinton, “Jesus – Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God,” 29.

⁹⁰ Haight, *The Future of Christology*, 18. Emphasis mine.

⁹¹ Ibid. Emphasis mine. I discussed similar idea in my research master’s thesis: Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, “Experiencing Christology: Donald Gelpi’s Interpretation of the Chalcedonian Christological Formula” (unpublished research master’s thesis, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, 2016), 67-71. In the work, I considered particularly the contextual content and significance of the Chalcedonian christological formulation, on the one hand, and as grounding for other contextual Christologies, on the other hand.

⁹² Robert Schreiter, “Images of Jesus in Contemporary Culture,” *Concilium* 3 (2008): 124-129, at 124.

⁹³ Thomas B. Slater, *Christ and Community: A Socio-Historical Study of the Christology of Revelation*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 178 (England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1999), 163. For an excellent discussion of the “images” of Jesus Christ and their significance for understanding the christological faith and commitment of an ecclesial community, see Mathias Neuman and

understanding and experience of who Christ is and what he does. They actualize an individual's or community's relationship with and response to God, Christ, humanity, the world, and reality in the broadest sense. In this light, image has a certain ontological significance because it is the self-realization of a particular being, and is thus, constitutive of its essence.

A further point follows from what we have said and goes to explain why in our study we prefer to speak of Christ as *image*. It is that christological images open out more to present and concrete realities: social, cultural, political, economic, etc. As Sallie McFague puts it, "one cannot hope to interpret Christian faith for one's own time if one remains indifferent to the basic *images* that are the lifeblood of interpretation and that greatly influence people's perceptions and behaviour."⁹⁴ In a somewhat different but related line of discussion on the theological and practical significance of images, Steven Bevans, American systematic theologian, acknowledges that (christological) "images are the ways that most *creatively* and powerfully express our visions and convictions; they challenge us and motivate us."⁹⁵ Thus, images provide standards that we are willing to stretch towards and live up to in daily life. "They help to stir up emotional energy that we need to live out our commitments; they lay bare the theories and theologies out of which all of us live, and give shape to who we are, how we see ourselves and our society."⁹⁶

In his book *Models of the Church*, the American Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles, underscores how images occupy the most prominent positions "among the positive tools that have been used to illuminate the mysteries of faith."⁹⁷ Dulles remarks that images are "immensely important for the life of the Church – for its preaching, its liturgy, and its general *esprit de corps*."⁹⁸ For Dulles, theology depends heavily on images in order to faithfully communicate the Christian experience of God.⁹⁹ In one important passage given below, Dulles provides grounds on which to elucidate more directly the idea under consideration, concerning our emphasis on christological image and imagination, with an eye towards a constructive exploration of the African Christologies. It deserves mention here at length:

Thomas P. Walters, *Christology: True God and True Man* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2002). In the fifth chapter of the work that treats of "Images of Jesus Christ in Catholic Spirituality," Neuman and Walters express that to speak of image "implies more than a statement of meaning about his identity or salvific achievements." They maintain that, "[christological] image functions like a complex symbol that fuses together intellectual understandings, emotional responses, and relational styles." Neuman and Walters, *Christology*, 60.

⁹⁴ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xi. Emphasis in the original.

⁹⁵ Steven Bevans, "Images of the Priesthood in Today's Church," *Emmanuel: The Magazine of Eucharistic Spirituality* 102 (1996): 389-398, at 390.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine. See also Helen F. Bergin, O.P., "Biblical and Cultural Images of Jesus," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60 (1994): 185-197. Bergin writes that, "images, whether visual or intellectual, are not simply something entering and leaving the mind without affecting the person." Images "have power to motivate, to affect behaviour, to guide the way people live." She then goes on to say that "every person has many images sustaining them in life, and images of Jesus are central both for expressing what is believed about the mystery of life and for how that gift is lived." Bergin, "Biblical and Cultural Images of Jesus," 186.

⁹⁷ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Image Book, Doubleday, 1987), 11.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

“The psychology and *spirituality* of images is exceedingly subtle and complex. In the religious sphere, images function as symbols. That is to say, they speak to man existentially and find an echo in the inarticulate depths of his psyche. Such images communicate through their evocative power. They convey a latent meaning that is apprehended in a non-conceptual, even a subliminal, way. Images transform the horizons of man’s life, integrate his perception of reality, alter his scale of values, reorient his loyalties, attachments, and aspirations in a manner far exceeding the powers of abstract conceptual thought. Religious images, as used in the bible, Christian preaching...and rooted in the corporate experience of the faithful, focus our experience in a new way. They have an aesthetic appeal, and are apprehended not simply by the mind but by the imagination, the heart, or more properly, the whole man.”¹⁰⁰

In the rest of the work, Dulles draws on these insights on image and shows how “extremely luxuriant” the New Testament is in producing ecclesiological imagery and its significance for understanding the reality of the Body of Christ in our time, which transcends any simple or singular formulation and description. Each and every image discloses certain truth about the mystery of the Church. According to Dulles, some of the images are intended to inspire hope and courage in the face of upheaval and situation of suffering. Others emphasize the importance of relatedness to God, our continuity with God’s past acts, or our connectedness to Jesus Christ. If this is important for and true of ecclesiology – and surely it is – how much more so must this be true of the mystery of Christ himself. Thus, our task is to pay attention to the grassroots christological images presented to the global Church by our African brothers and sisters, to employ them thoughtfully and critically, and to reflect deeply on what these images mean for them and their longing for well-being in a transformed society. Justifying such a shift in theological agenda and sources is a primary objective of my current argument.

Therefore, I fully agree with scholars like Stephan van Erp who states that theology, not least, Christology, is *fides quaerens (imaginationes et) imagines*, faith seeking (imagination and) images.¹⁰¹ Such thoughts about christological faith do not make the creedal doctrine of Christ or his personality as *unum et idem Dominum, verus Deus et verus homo* reducible to mere human construction, nor does it mean that anything is possible in christological reflection. Rather, Van Erp’s insights do help, I think, to open up a ‘new’ understanding of Christ’s identity and work at a very existential level. The insights serve to bring home to the individual believer and community of believers, the reality of an object that is “alive and active,” Christ. The point is clear, and of fundamental importance: our imagination and the images of Christ evoked therefrom are places and confessions where the object of Christian consciousness, in all its complexity is so “vividly realized” and “existentially charged” that they are able to command the Christians’ enduring commitment.¹⁰²

As such, we can observe that christological imagination and images in which the person and work of Christ are experienced and expressed, respectively, are vital to the *praxis* of faith, especially in the social context of Africa. Therefore, it would be helpful for a theologian, who is searching for how belief in Jesus Christ can inspire a more

¹⁰⁰ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 12. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰¹ Van Erp, *The Art of Theology*, 254. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰² Merrigan, “The Image of the Word,” 39.

transformative faith and commitment within the context, to privilege an understanding of the African experience and expression of Christ in the light of imagination and image. Where the imagination could be understood as proclamation and longing, and image as offering a vision of faith in Jesus and for life in society.¹⁰³ With these ideas we already hint at the socio-theological significance of christological belief, which I shall consider briefly in what follows.

2.3. Imagination and Image(s): Socio-Theological Significance

I have described what I consider the most appropriate theoretical-practical framework – imagination and image – for discussing the nature and form of christological belief in African Christianity. I now return in this section to elaborate how the insights so far bear on the argument and one of the goals we seek to realize in the present chapter: to highlight the theological and social significance of the experience and proclamation of Christ, especially at the grassroots level.

Michael L. Cook in his book *Christology as Narrative Quest*, employs the insight by Schneiders to explain how faith in Jesus Christ is “a life of the imagination,” and how the images constructed in the effort to live the Christian faith are “dynamic and tensive principles of interpretation that allow us to relate individual and partial experiences into a whole.”¹⁰⁴ Cook also maintains that christological images “operate simultaneously in relation to past, present and future, yet are open-ended, so that the process of interpretation is a never-ending spiral.”¹⁰⁵ He takes up this idea in his article “The African Experience of Jesus” (2009), which is a good example of how christological images are constructed through the “paschal imagination” of Africans.¹⁰⁶ Cook, referring also to Steven Bevans, argues that christological images, “provide ways through which one knows reality in all its richness and complexity, even though they provide a knowledge that is always partial or inadequate, but never false or merely subjective.”¹⁰⁷ The relationship to (a) reality as experienced within a particular context all the more makes the attention to the images of Christ in the African Christianity very important, because as these christological images are adopted in contemporary Christian praxis, they serve to redress the very social issues that prompted their formulation.¹⁰⁸

Like Cook, John Nwaogaidu, a Nigerian theologian, explains that the African imagination of the person of Christ resonates with what one finds in the Old Testament concerning “God’s self-revelation of Himself through signs and wonders to the people of Israel, who in turn developed their understanding of Him by the articulation of certain

¹⁰³ Schreiter, “Images in Africa,” in “Images of Jesus in Contemporary Cultures,” 125-126.

¹⁰⁴ Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 9-11.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁶ Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 670.

¹⁰⁷ Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 14. The reference is to Steven P. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 25.

¹⁰⁸ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 251.

images about Him.”¹⁰⁹ This divine self-revelation accessible through human imagination and articulation reached its high point in the incarnation. As such, Paul in his description of the person of Jesus refers to him as the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).¹¹⁰ Hence, Nwaogaidu points out that, “considering biblical imagination, contextual Christology tends to and should always enquire how Christians in Africa imagine and could better imagine Christ in their minds and hearts, especially as they profess their faith in him.”¹¹¹ He argues that, this is all the more significant because African belief is also already rooted in the experience, worldview and realities that continue to influence the African imagination and thinking about Christ.¹¹²

The idea of the socio-theological significance of (grassroots) christological imagination and images in Africa receives its finest expression in Orobator’s remarks. Orobator says that “while imagination is the gift of the individual mind, in the context of Africa, individual prowess has a social premium; its exercise takes place in a communal framework.”¹¹³ No matter how dexterous a single finger is, says an African proverb, it cannot catch a louse in the hair. More to the point, a vital component of a transformative Christology is imagination. And in the words of Lisa Isherwood, imagination is a key point in any prophetic, not least christological, act that can bring about the transformation of society.¹¹⁴ According to Isherwood, “if we are to break out of the hold that oppressive systems increasingly seem to have on the world, then vision empowered by imagination is crucial.”¹¹⁵ There is a christological premise to Orobator and Isherwood’s statements. I read that in Jon Sobrino. It helps to elucidate splendidly our thoughts about the socio-theological character of grassroots Christologies within the framework of imagination and image. Sobrino writes:

“Faith in Christ is essentially a community faith and not the sum of individual faiths, and this has been true since the resurrection of Christ, which did not simply produce individual faiths, but called into being a community and brought about a situation in

¹⁰⁹ John Chidubem Nwaogaidu, *Jesus Christ – Truly God and Truly Man: Towards a Systematic Dialogue between Christology in Africa and Pope Benedict XVI’s Christological Conception*, African Theology Volume 3 (Zürich: LIT VERLAG, 2016), 60.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. For a discussion of the historical and biblical-systematic christological implication of an understanding of Jesus Christ as “image of the invisible God,” and especially of the word “image”, see Jennifer R. Strawbridge, *The Pauline Effect: The Use of the Pauline Epistles by Early Christian Writers*, Studies of the Bible and Its Reception Volume 5 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2015), 140-149.

¹¹¹ Nwaogaidu, *Jesus Christ – Truly God and Truly Man*, 61.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, “Introduction: Doing Theology as a Collaborative Effort,” in *Theological Reimagination: Conversations on Church, Religion, and Society in Africa*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2014), 9-25, at 9. For a more technical discussion of this idea, see James K. A. Smith, “From Worldviews to Social Imaginaries,” chapter in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Studies Vol.1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 63-71. Smith appropriates Charles Taylor’s concept of “social imaginaries” and argues that, Christian theological imagination is always communal and social. To Smith, there is no private imagination; and it is social in two ways. “On the one hand, it is a social phenomenon received from and shared with others; on the other hand, it is a vision of and for social life – a vision of what counts as human flourishing.” Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 66.

¹¹⁴ Lisa Isherwood, *Liberating Christ: Exploring the Christologies of Contemporary Liberation Movements* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999), as cited in Carter Heyward, review of *Liberating Christ* by Lisa Isherwood, *Feminist Theology* 25 (2000): 122-124, at 123.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

which faith had communality as an essential dimension. This means primarily that we carry one another in the faith, give our own faith and receive it, so that, formally, it is the community that believes in Christ. Christology is ecclesial, therefore, not only because individuals believe within a community called church, but because it is a feature of the act of believing that it depends on the faith of others.”¹¹⁶

Therefore, exploring what the image of Christ that Christians in Africa have, and how Christ has been and is still being imagined by them, is a way of not simply knowing, but intimately descending into the African social situation, “in order to engage vital issues and questions at the interstices of faith and life,” and which is quite fundamental.¹¹⁷ I do not need to emphasize that this is also in line with the basic methodological orientation of this research.¹¹⁸ Such an exploration offers a christological vision ‘*from within*’ the horizon of the concrete reality and experiences of the people to whom the theologian should also listen, in their experience and understanding of Jesus Christ, especially in the midst of their struggles and sufferings. Diane Stinton rightly describes this art of listening in terms of what she refers to as “corporate discernment.”¹¹⁹ In this way, one becomes acquainted with the real situations of a given people, who in the midst of their challenging circumstances and in their effort to discover the place of God and what difference faith in Jesus makes in these conditions, have come up with and have sustained an understanding of Christ in certain specific images.

These images have formed and still inform the ways such a community of faith have tried to engage with and respond to their social issues and “to make real God’s message of salvation” in Jesus Christ.¹²⁰ This reorientation demands paying attention to them, listening to their confessions, and without losing sight of the limits in them, discern and disclose the potentials they bear for advancing a christologizing from below, within, and ahead. It also demands working out in theological and pastoral terms a transformative christological spirituality, “not on behalf of the people, but by the people themselves, as inventive agents moved by the spirit of God.”¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 29.

¹¹⁷ Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, “Method and Context: How and Where Theology Works in Africa,” in *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 125. See also Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 51-53.

¹¹⁸ The method which I somewhat adopt for this research is the “generative contextualised method” proposed by Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, a Jesuit Nigerian theologian. According to Orobator, this method consists of four main moments. The first moment which is employed in the present chapter is what he calls the “*moment of encounter* of reality in its *conditioned and conditioning potential*.” Within this moment, the theologian seeks to answer the question, “what is going on here?” Orobator, “Method and Context,” 124. Emphasis mine. The “generative contextualized method” can be categorised under the second of the three styles and method of theology identified by Gerald O’Collins in his book *Rethinking Fundamental Theology: Toward a New Fundamental Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 322-341, at 324. This second style, which O’Collins describes as “a practical way of doing theology,” is shaped by the “desire to promote social justice and the common good.” He puts it more pointedly: The second style of theology thrives on *encounter* (a favourite word that I use in the subtitle of this chapter) with the ordinary believer. It “encourages us,” says O’Collins, “to consult the poor, the powerless and the suffering in matters of faith, doctrine and morality.” That is why this style of theology “typically looks to the contemporary situation,” in which faith in Jesus Christ is proclaimed and lived.

¹¹⁹ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 53.

¹²⁰ D.F. Pilario, *Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu*, BETL 183 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 451.

¹²¹ Georges De Schrijver, “Preface,” in Pilario, *Back to the Rough Ground of Praxis*, x.

In this section, with the introduction and clarification of the framework of imagination and image, I have made an initial attempt to raise the reality of Christ, as experienced and expressed at the grassroots level, to a socio-theological reality. My purpose in doing so is to be able, in the next section, to examine further how christological faith is – in my view – a living experience of Christ and the expression of a longing for integral human well-being.

3. Examining Three Popular Images of Christ

A survey of some recent key publications on grassroots Christologies in contemporary African Christianity reveals an abundance of images of Christ.¹²² Some of the images (among many others) that come to the fore include the following: Christ as Healer, Christ as Life-Giver or Abundant Life, Christ as Liberator, Christ as King or Chief, and Christ as Provider. There are minor variations of these images, and considerable overlap is at times present. For this reason, it is possible to trace clear points of convergence that allow a simple but provisional categorization of these, sometimes, apparently divergent proposals.¹²³ For example, similar emphases are brought out in the images of Christ as

¹²² I already referred to some of the works by theologians, who have engaged in empirical research, particularly in the four Anglophone countries in Africa that form the scope of the present research – Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Nigeria – as to images of Jesus Christ that are popular among ordinary people. See footnote reference no. 33, *supra*.

¹²³ Theologians have grappled with the issue of how to categorize the various images of Christ in African Christian and theological landscape. It is not my intention to offer a discussion of that here. For a quick instructive, though not exhaustive, categorization of some of the images, see Raymond Moloney, S.J., “African Christology,” *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 505-515. See also Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 49-53 and 54-220. Jesuit theologian and scholar of African Christology, Raymond Moloney, suggests that these christological images point to the two tasks African Christologists are trying to get around, and the two tasks, in turn, form the broad heading for making sense of these images. Moloney writes: “African Christology finds itself before two tasks...one is that of inculturation and how to communicate the faith in a more indigenous way. The other is that of praxis and how society can be changed through our Christianity (Christology).” See Moloney, “African Christology,” 505-506. Hence, one could speak of the first category as the christological images of inculturation, and the second as the christological images of liberating praxis or simply, liberation. Diane Stinton underscores that in contemporary African Christology, two categories are mainly spoken of. They are the two main trends, or what Stinton describes as the “‘prevailing paradigms’...that emerged from the late 1950s to the late 1980s.” These are “inculturation” and “liberation.” Stinton remarks that the two broad classifications have served and still serves “an important purpose in distinguishing the various contexts eliciting African theologies, plus the sources favoured and the methods employed in their construction.” Thus, the twofold categorization, according to her, “retains instructive value for an overview of theological development in Africa.” This and more can be said of christological development in Africa. It is not my intention to offer an in-depth discussion and analysis of these categories as that is beyond the scope of the present chapter. I shall do that more fittingly in the second chapter. However, a very brief description of them might be necessary at this point. The first category, as Stinton describes, “entails theological exploration of African indigenous cultures in an attempt to integrate the African pre-Christian religious heritage with the Christian faith so as to “ensure the integrity of African Christian identity and selfhood.” The second category, according to her is to “integrate the theme of liberation in the rest of the African cultural background.” And where liberation “is not confined to modern socioeconomic and political levels but includes emancipation from other forms of oppression such as disease, poverty, hunger, ignorance, and the subjugation of women.” See Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 49. From what has been said so far, it is clear inculturation and liberation Christologies are not mutually exclusive. Commitment to inculturation “does not necessitate inattention or opposition” to liberation or vice-versa. Jean-Marc Éla avers that, “*liberation of the oppressed must be the primary condition for any authentic inculturation of the Christian message.*” See Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, vi, cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 49. Emphasis in the original.

Healer and Christ as Life-Giver. Likewise, there is a considerable overlap between Christ as Liberator and Christ as King or as Provider. There is also a distinction between those images that are more universal and draw on language explicitly found in Scripture, and those images that do not utilize explicitly biblical language but are rooted more naturally in the particularity of the African traditional religion and social-cultural context. As Robert Schreiter expresses: “The fact that Jesus has so often been portrayed in the Gospels as a healer made this a natural choice of image for Africans.”¹²⁴ More to the fact of its biblical portrayal, the image of Christ as healer or as life-giver touches on the “fullness of life that is at the heart of what many African peoples see as the goal of being human.”¹²⁵ I shall return to this idea later in this chapter.

There are images such as Ancestor, Proto-Ancestor, Elder, Guest, and Master of Initiation, which are also considered popular in Africa.¹²⁶ The consideration is due to the fact that they are mainly informed by the African worldview. As Orobator says, they are “derived from categories which are authentically African and speak *im*-mediately to the African consciousness.”¹²⁷ There is no doubt that these images are important. Schreiter rightly observes, they are “mediating images” that provide a way of relating Jesus more closely to African cultures and primal imagination.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, I consider them to be somewhat outmoded, especially in the quest to connect Jesus to issues of social transformation in today’s Africa. Most of these images tend to be answers to the question, “who do *African Christologists* say the Son of Man is?,” and not “who do *the people* say the Son of Man is?”¹²⁹ That is to say, the images no longer speak to the majority of the African Christians nowadays. I wonder whether the Christians who gather in the name of Jesus Christ in many African Churches today, profess and acclaim him as ancestor, chief, or elder. The images are more important to the theologians than to ordinary Christians. But even at that, they no longer receive much attention in the discussion about the meaning and relevance of Jesus Christ in the present social context of Africa.

Therefore, I shall focus on what I consider the more dominant christological images; images that are pervasive in the present-day African Christian consciousness. Three such images are of special note: Christ as healer, as liberator, and as king. I have chosen to discuss these three christological images because, as Donald Goergen observed, following his empirical study undertaken in Kenya, they emerge from within context-aware, praxis-oriented, socio-politically conscious theologies.¹³⁰ As such, they promote and have the potential to foster a *new* African consciousness within Christianity. In addition, I propose

¹²⁴ Schreiter, “Images of Jesus in Contemporary Culture,” 126.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ For a discussion of some of these images, see Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984); Enyi Ben Udoh, *Guest Christology: An Interpretative View of the Christological Problem in Africa*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 59 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1988); Robert J. Schreiter ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa*; Schreiter, “Images of Jesus in Contemporary Culture.”

¹²⁷ Orobator, “The Quest for an African Christ,” 81. Emphasis in the original.

¹²⁸ Schreiter, “Images of Jesus in Contemporary Culture,” 125. See also Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 85-96.

¹²⁹ See my discussion above on the reason for beginning at the grassroots, where a vast majority of the people, the ordinary believers are, in the search for a transformative Christology.

¹³⁰ Goergen, “The Quest for the Christ of Africa,” 11.

further reasons to justify why I consider these three images in particular as popular; so in what follows, I explain in detail why I have chosen them in my engagement with the grassroots Christologies in this research.

The first reason is personal, pastoral, and, by a close connection, liturgical. For eleven years, between 2003 and 2014, I was a pastoral worker, actively involved in ministry with grassroots Christian communities in the South Eastern region of Nigeria. Some of the communities include people from other parts of Africa, like Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Cameroon, Togo and Chad. I was and I still feel very close to the members of these communities. In my sympathetic-critical attention to them, through sharing in their daily lives, which included participating in their lives of faith, I had a first-person encounter of their experience and understanding of Christ's identity and work, in the context of ecclesial ministry. My close personal connection with them and, reflective observations of individual believers, became special avenues of insight into the *quality* of their lives of faith vis-à-vis the concrete realities of their daily lives. It became clear to me that the *immediate* expectations of the members of these grassroots communities were wholeness, liberation and benevolent care. These expectations led them to confess Christ in images such as healer, liberator and king. Each of these images relate to the struggles of everyday African Christian for healing, abundant life, integral well-being, social justice, and good governance. So, in many of the liturgical celebrations and prayer gatherings, these believing communities confessed their unwavering faith in the healing, liberating, and saving power of Christ. However, the question was – and remains – whether the Christians grasped the full implications of the proclamation of Christ in those images. Specifically, how should they understand its import in relation to their quest for the transformation of their social situation – a situation in which they can experience healing, life in freedom, and flourishing life. This brings me to the second reason for my choice of these images.

Pre-eminently, here, I have in mind the sacramental-theological resonance of such images of Christ. For, in fact, the aspects of the three images correspond to the threefold character or office of Christ and of every baptized Christian – priest, prophet and king. These are described in the Catholic tradition as the “*tria munera*” of Christ's and of every Christian's life and mission.¹³¹ In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Jesus Christ is the one whom the Father anointed with the Holy and established as priest, prophet, and king. The whole people of God participate in these three offices of Christ and bears the responsibilities for mission and service that flow from them.”¹³² Thus, the three christological images chosen here can be spoken of as the Christians “imaginative apprehension,” not only of Christ's *tria munera*, but also of Christianity's founding event – the life, death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ – what theologians call the Christ-event.¹³³

¹³¹ See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 30-38; and Vatican Council II, “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 18 November, 1965,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman Tanner, vol. 2 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), no. 10. Hereafter *Apostolicam Actuositatem*.

¹³² CCC, nos. 783-786.

¹³³ See Merrigan, “The Image of the Word,” 19.

The third, and perhaps, more obvious reason is drawn from the sociological findings in the works on African Christologies by respected authors – Donald Goergen,¹³⁴ Diane Stinton,¹³⁵ Clifton Clarke¹³⁶ and Victor Ezigbo¹³⁷ – who have carried out extensive empirical research on the popular images of Christ in sub-Saharan Africa.¹³⁸ The contributions of these authors appear prominently in the procedure of their research, or methodology, which aided their identification of the popularity of the images. In each case, their research procedures favour qualitative field-based research, which, nevertheless, integrates quantitative research.¹³⁹ In their socio-christological works, the qualitative methods that they employed, according to them, encompass “in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation in a number of settings for christological expression, as well as interpretation of song lyrics and visual representations of Christology.”¹⁴⁰ This practice enabled each of these authors to gain privileged access to the experiences of their respondents in their specific social context.¹⁴¹ So that, in presenting the fruits of their inquiries, they offer a descriptive interpretation, and not simply a statistical demonstration of the experiences of their interviewees. However, in order to avoid the danger of overgeneralizations or the risk of personalization, effort was also made to ground the observations in empirical data.

These combined methodological procedures, according to Stinton, served to illustrate similar phenomena (about the experience and understanding of Christ as healer, liberator and king) across sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴² Stinton (as the other authors) concludes there is manifold evidence from the sociological findings that, the experience and proclamation of Jesus Christ as healer, liberator, and king (leader) hold “a prime place in the imagination

¹³⁴ Goergen is a Dominican theologian. He carried out his sociological work on the images of Jesus in African Christianity while he lived and taught in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1998.

¹³⁵ Diane Stinton is a Canadian theologian and expert in the study of Christianity in Africa. She lived and taught for many years in Kenya. Her book *Jesus of Africa* which has been described as “a benchmark work” in the field of African Christologies, and her other related articles and essays, draw from her research in Kenya, Ghana and Uganda.

¹³⁶ Clifton Clarke is an Associate Professor of Global Mission and World Christianity. His works investigate christological belief specifically from the perspective of African indigenous churches (popularly known as the AICs) of Akan in Ghana. See, for example, Clifton Clarke, “Christ in Africa,” *Journal of Theology and Religion* (2000): 2-12; “Christological Construction Among Ghanaian AICs,” *Africa Theological Journal* 28 (2005): 23-41; “Christology in African Indigenous Churches in Ghana,” *Missionalia* 34 (2006): 285-309.

¹³⁷ Ezigbo’s work concentrates on “some grassroots Christologies which emerged from the qualitative fieldwork research,” he conducted in South East of Nigeria in the summer of four consecutive years (2003-2006). Ezigbo, *Re-imagining African Christologies*, 103.

¹³⁸ See the list of their works in footnote reference no. 33, *supra*.

¹³⁹ Qualitative as different from the quantitative method, is a unique method that is most appropriate to specific forms of ethnographical research. The method prioritizes personal encounter and active conversations between the researchers and the interviewees, who in this case are African Christians.

¹⁴⁰ Stinton, “Jesus–Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God” 9. See also Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 255-258; Clarke, *African Christology*, 5,10; Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 104-109.

¹⁴¹ Their method proves to be useful in the present research, especially in reinforcing the move to relate christological imagination to the concrete experience of many Christians in Africa’s social context. See Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 52.

¹⁴² Stinton, “Jesus–Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God,” 9-10. Apart from ancestor, the images of Christ as healer, liberator and king were three of the four images Donald Goergen identifies as dominant in his own research. According to him, they are the images that have been given much emphasis among African theologians, pastors, and ordinary Christians. Goergen, “The Quest for the Christ of Africa,” 6.

and in the lived experience of vast numbers of Christians.”¹⁴³ They were by far the most “visible” christological images, in which Jesus Christ “is clearly perceived in terms of “Immanuel – God with us – in Africa, and in terms of being the “image of the invisible God,” or the one who puts a human face on the transcendent.”¹⁴⁴ At the same time, a more critical look at the narratives, the limits, and the socially transformative character or potential of Christians’ imagination and proclamation of Christ as their healer, liberator and king remains crucial; which is what I offer in what follows, within the confines of the rest of this chapter.

3.1. The Narratives at the Grassroots

3.1.1. Christ Our Healer

Certainly, healing is a central human concern. It is highly vital in African consciousness, and even more so, given the reality of many curable diseases and illnesses suffered by majority of people in the continent. So, the struggle for healing, wholeness, and flourishing life, as Cécé Kolié puts it, is fundamental for the African person.¹⁴⁵ Kolié refers to the research by the World Health Organization (hereafter WHO), and his own survey among Africans at the time of his writing, to show how the longing for health is the predominant concern among many Christians.¹⁴⁶ The situation is not different today, judging by a very recent report still by the WHO entitled *World Health Statistics 2018: Monitoring Health for the Sustainable Development Goals*.¹⁴⁷ In it, there is a painful reference to the health crisis in many parts of Africa, the devastating epidemic of HIV and AIDS, and the persistence of malaria that are enfeebling generations of Africans.¹⁴⁸ Hence, in the document, “Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” the safeguarding of healthy lives and promotion of well-being, particularly in Africa (mentioned as such in the document), is given as the third of the seventeen sustainable development goals and targets.¹⁴⁹ That is the existential context, the concrete social situation, which makes the imagination of Christ as healer a dominant one in African Christianity.¹⁵⁰

Many African Christians proclaim Christ as healer, obviously, because he is also portrayed as such in the gospels. Stinton and the other authors underline the fact that the

¹⁴³ Stinton, “Jesus–Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God,” 38.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Cécé Kolié, “Jesus as Healer?,” in Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 132.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ World Health Organization, “Global Health Observatory (GHO) Data,” *World Health Statistics Report 2018*, https://www.who.int/gho/publications/world_health_statistics/en/ [accessed May 15, 2019]. See also the 2015 document by the United Nations, “Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication> [accessed July 3, 2019].

¹⁴⁸ For a recent collection of essays that offer moving sociological account and profound theological perspectives about HIV and AIDS on the continent of Africa, see Jacquineau Azetsop, ed., *HIV & AIDS in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).

¹⁴⁹ United Nations, “Transforming Our World,” 18.

¹⁵⁰ Shorter, “Folk Christianity and Functional Christology,” 133-137, at 136. See also Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 89; and Clarke, “Healing and Wholeness,” in *African Christology*, 123.

vast majority of Christians, who proclaim Christ as their healer, expect that just as Christ in the gospels healed all the sick people who were brought to him (cf. Mt 15:30, Lk 4:40), he would also heal them of *all* diseases and their causes. Stinton particularly narrates some of her personal encounters with Christians who confess such beliefs. She tells, for instance, about Mary Kizito, a lecturer (surprisingly, perhaps given her views as an intellectual) at Daystar University, Nairobi, who strongly upholds the belief that “Jesus as healer can take away all the diseases, like HIV/AIDS and malaria, which kill people in Africa.”¹⁵¹ Mary Kizito is representative of the vast majority of Christians, who, not only uphold such a belief, but expect that their vibrant proclamation of Christ as healer will move him to cure them of their diseases, deliver them of all their ailments, and restore them to physical health and fullness of life.¹⁵²

Stinton also provides some other very vivid data regarding this way of understanding Christ’s identity and work as healer.¹⁵³ In homes, churches, so-called healing ministries, streets, markets, offices, and astonishingly, in clinics and hospitals too, Christ is invoked in often loud tones to heal those who are sick.¹⁵⁴ Christ the healer is sought even in unexpected places, as Stan Chu Ilo exposes in a very recent investigation about the search for health, healing and wholeness among African Christians.¹⁵⁵ Paul Gifford draws on the writings and preaching of a popular African (Nigerian) pastor, David Oyedepo, in order to show how the image of Christ as healer is operative in some of these aforementioned places.¹⁵⁶ In these places, as Victor Ezigbo’s empirically research-based case studies in Nigeria shows, there are abundance of healing services with prayers and exorcism, with many healing claims and testimonies.¹⁵⁷ Ezigbo points out the readiness of many Christians across various denominations to locate Jesus-talk and doing, largely in terms and within the framework of healing, and the quests to achieve total well-being.¹⁵⁸ Consequently, many African Christians engage in long night prayer vigils, protracted fasts, exuberant crusades, conventions and “miraculous meetings” organized by prominent and ‘powerful

¹⁵¹ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 65.

¹⁵² Duke professor of New Testament, Craig Keener, has assembled a massive two-volume work demonstrating that, in fact, millions of Christians in Africa even today hold such confessions and claim to have experienced a miracle through belief in Christ as healer. See Craig Keener, “Healing in Mainline Churches: Examples in Africa,” in *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 309-358. See also Emmanuel Milingo, *The World in Between: Christian Healing and the Struggle for Spiritual Survival*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.

¹⁵³ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 64-71.

¹⁵⁴ Clarke, *African Christology*, 173-174.

¹⁵⁵ Stan Chu Ilo, “Searching for Healing in a Miraculous Stream: The Fate of God’s People in Africa,” in *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018), 45-80. See also Ilo, “Interpreting the Search for Health and Healing Among African Charismatic and Pentecostal Groups: A Theological Bio-Social Approach,” *Bigard Theological Studies* 38, no. 1 (2018): 1-36.

¹⁵⁶ Some of David Oyedepo’s works that are all published by his Dominion Publishing House, Lagos, include: *Keys to Divine Health* (1986), *All You Need to Be Healed* (1990), *Breaking the Curses of Life* (1997), *Conquering Controlling Powers* (1997), *The Eternal Healer* (2000), *Commanding the Supernatural* (2006). For an extensive discussion of the meaning and operation of the image of Christ as healer in what Gifford refers to as “Oyedepo’s Christianity,” see Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 35-42.

¹⁵⁷ Ezigbo, *Re-imagining African Christologies*, 120-126.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

men and women of God’ purported to be healers in the name of Christ the healer.¹⁵⁹ These exercises leave many of the Christians enervated, robbing them of the strength they need to become creative agents of Christ’s ongoing healing presence and act.

The Christians and their leaders hope that by the exercise of their ‘agency’ in and through these religious means, they will be healed, delivered and restored to fullness of life. I shall treat this sort of exercise of agency shortly, as one of the limitations of grassroots christological imagination, precisely in what I refer to as “energetic passivity” of the christological faith and hope. The Christians see these religious, or so-called spiritual exercises, as acts of their trust in what Jesus their healer will do *for* them. A majority of them, however, do not yet come to terms with the fact that there is no example of healing in the New Testament, as I will try to show later, which does not involve some sort of *relationship* between Jesus and the one to be cured. Such a personal relationship establishes the context and vital, saving momentum for the healing (transformation) that occurs in the life of the sick person, and subsequently, through him or her, in the lives of other people with whom he or she comes in contact. The example of Jesus’ healing of Peter’s mother-in-law is a case in point (Lk 4:38-40). I shall return to this example below. For the moment, it suffices to mention how in every healing action of Jesus there is always the presence of the three elements – enhanced relationship, empowered agency, and embodied actions.

Having said that, a constructive or sympathetic assessment reveals that the health gospel forms and informs a particular christological mindset that recognizes Jesus’s identity as a saviour, and his miraculous power to bestow blessings, particularly of health and wholeness.¹⁶⁰ It seems that such an image of Christ, seen through his saving power to heal, is the way in which Christians strive to make sense of, or as Ezigbo puts it, “to perceive and relate to” the acclamation of Christ as “a prophet mighty in deed and word” (Lk 24:19), as well as the doctrinal formulations about him as “true God and true man.”¹⁶¹ They believe that, as “true man,” he represents what a good and full life is in the fullest sense. More to the point, Christ knows and shares their experiences of brokenness wrought by sickness and disease, becoming through his incarnation an advocate for them and for their well-being. For the gospels portrayed Jesus, with perfect human empathy, as always having pity on individuals and people who were sick (cf. Mk 1:41, Mt 9:36). As “true God,”

¹⁵⁹ For an example of where these so-called “charismatic practices” are carried out and promoted, see Thomas Landy’s account of what Landy, citing Stan Chu Ilo, rightly described as the largest popular Catholic gathering and event in Nigeria. Thomas M. Landy, “All Night at Fr. Mbaka’s Adoration Ministry: A Real and Moving Presence in Nigeria,” *Catholics & Cultures*, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/all-night-fr-mbakas-adoration-ministry-real-and-moving-presence-nigeria> [accessed May 26, 2020]. Landy’s write-up is based on his visits to the adoration ground, his personal encounter with the popular priest, Fr. Ejike Mbaka, his conversation with Stan Chu Ilo, and on the latter’s work, “Searching for Healing in a Miraculous Stream: The Fate of God’s People in Africa,” 50. See also Thomas Landy, “Catholic Life in Igboland, Nigeria’s Catholic Stronghold,” *Catholics & Cultures*, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/catholic-life-igboland-nigerias-catholic-stronghold> [accessed May 16, 2020]. Thomas Landy is the founder of Catholics & Cultures, an initiative that aims to foster comparative study of contemporary Catholic life around the globe. It focuses on “lived Catholicism,” the ways that ordinary Catholics practice their faith in their everyday lives. The initiative is hosted by the Rev. Michael C. McFarland, S.J. Center for Religion, Ethics and Cultures at the College of the Holy Cross, USA. Landy is also the director of the Centre.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

the one “in whom the fullness of God dwells” (Col 2:9), he has the power to take away all the diseases and to restore their physical health.

In addition to this biblical and creedal underpinning for the Christians’ narrative about Jesus’s healing power, there is also an underlying traditional worldview. The Christians’ proclamation of Christ as healer has also an expectation nurtured against the background of the African religious-cultural worldview.¹⁶² In this worldview, health in Africa does not mean only lack of sickness; it connotes well-being in a holistic sense. It touches on the entire constitution of the human person and the whole constellation of his or her environment and social sphere. So, health is appreciated as encompassing physical, mental, spiritual and social wellbeing. For this reason, sickness is not primarily seen to be the result of only physical or psychological symptoms but also of deeply spiritual causes. As Diane Stinton garners:

“Illness is viewed as a calamity that not only strikes the particular individual, but also indicates a disruption of social relationships, thereby making it a family and communal concern. Where health is viewed as being more than biological, encompassing physical, mental, spiritual, social, and environmental well-being, illness signifies an unfortunate disruption of harmony in these factors. Organic causes may well be recognized, yet the overriding belief attributes sickness to spiritual or supernatural causes.”¹⁶³

From this perspective, Christians in confessing Christ as the healer, believe and hope that he has the power to also heal the suffering nations of Africa.¹⁶⁴ By the exercise of his healing might, Christ can *transform* “the nations of Africa that have been wounded by the slave trade, colonization, the post-colonial formation of the nation-states, neo-colonialism’s economic dependency, inter-tribal violence and war, the corruption of many post-independence national leaders.”¹⁶⁵ As Clarke also narrates, Christians believe (as much as Clarke himself does), that the healing Jesus “will bring order and integrity into African politics and socio-economic life.”¹⁶⁶ Christ’s healing power, says Clarke, “transcends and contradicts the distorted image of Africa created by European oppression.”¹⁶⁷ This christological narrative receives more spirited expression in the second image that I shall examine.

3.1.2. Christ Our Liberator

Within the boundaries of the grassroots christological currents in African Christianity is enshrined also the image of Christ as liberator. It is another dominant image at the grassroots level within the ecclesial and social contexts of contemporary African

¹⁶² Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 120-122. See also Clarke, *African Christology*, 122.

¹⁶³ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 63.

¹⁶⁴ See Goergen, “The Quest for the Christ of Africa,” 10. See also Clarke, *African Christology*, 172-173; and Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 120-121.

¹⁶⁵ Donald Goergen gathers from his findings that the belief and understanding that Jesus, by his healing power, will bring about the transformation of things and will wrought the desired social change in Africa, are also dominant.

¹⁶⁶ Clarke, “The Healer of Africa,” in *African Christology*, 173.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Christianity. Some African Christologists and Christians consider it an image that is foreign to the African worldview. For instance, Laurenti Magesa and Jesse Mugambi questioned whether the image of liberator can be applied to Christ today. They wondered whether it is justifiable in terms of the contemporary (socio-economic and political situation) of the African continent.¹⁶⁸ Ernst Wendland argues that, “there is no real traditional antecedent for the notion of ‘Liberator’, such as found in the case of Christ as ‘Healer’.”¹⁶⁹ Stinton says that some of the Christians she had interviewed consider the image of liberator somewhat elusive in the light of their ongoing concrete experiences and situations.¹⁷⁰ Some Christians think that this image is too illusory and unrealistic given the many realities and situations of poverty, injustice, exploitation and deprivation that has endured in Africa till this day. But are such impressions by both the theologians and some Christians sufficient to nullify the fact that many African Christians still imagine and proclaim Jesus Christ as their liberator? Without disregarding these views and questions about the image of Christ as liberator, I contend it is still an image that is operative in African Christian consciousness today, although the issues related to it are vast and complex. I shall refer to some oral and textual Christologies (some of which are presented by Stinton) in order to show how the image of Christ as liberator is still dominant today, and in order to gain a better understanding of what this image means and how it functions at the grassroots level.

Stinton still admits that Christ the liberator is a prevalent and widely confessed image that arose from within the context of her field research in Kenya, Uganda and Ghana.¹⁷¹ Drawing upon the testimonies, songs and experiences of ordinary African Christians, she narrates how Christ is proclaimed as one who liberates people and makes them free. According to Stinton, “an analysis of the oral Christologies reveals almost unanimous assent to the image of Jesus as liberator, with interpretations generally favouring personal and spiritual dimensions such as deliverance from sin, fear, and evil powers.”¹⁷² She gives a dramatic portrayal of her experience to illustrate what the identity and work of Jesus as liberator means to a typical ordinary African Christian:

“On September 10, 1998, I entered Grace Land Enterprises, a gift and flower shop in Koforidua, Ghana. On the wall behind the cashier was a picture of chains falling away from a pair of wrists, and the caption “Jesus can set you free.” Striking up a conversation with the young man working, I asked what Jesus had set him free from. He replied, “Certain pains and immorality.” Probed further, he explained, “It means, if I couldn’t have found Jesus, my life could have been in danger. I was drinking and smoking heavily, and Jesus has changed me. So I have found him very great and precious in my life.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, “Introduction,” in *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology*, ed. J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (Nairobi: Initiatives Publication, 1989), xiv.

¹⁶⁹ Ernst Wendland, “‘Who do People Say I Am?’: Contextualizing Christology in Africa,” *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* 10, no. 2 (1991): 13-32, at 23.

¹⁷⁰ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 218.

¹⁷¹ For a detailed presentation and analysis of the data see her *Jesus of Africa*, 205-207.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 207.

Such a vision of Jesus as liberator receives further expressions in the popular songs, specially composed liturgies and prayers, and humorous stories of many Christians. Orobator recounts his encounter with the Christian convicts at the correctional facility in Benin, Nigeria, whose belief in Jesus’ “liberating power and force” is expressed solely in their quest for freedom.¹⁷⁴ This articulation occurs regardless of whether individuals were guilty of the crimes for which they have been convicted or not, or deserving of the sentence that has been given them. For the prison inmates, Christ as liberator means the one who is their “bulldozer,” one who is “endowed with the power and force of a bulldozer” to tear down the prison walls and set them free, just as it had happened to Peter in the Acts of the Apostles (Ac 12:3-11).¹⁷⁵ Orobator also draws on a particular liturgical and prayer rite that is common in many Christian communities in order to show how the person and the message of Jesus Christ as liberator is appropriated by African Christians. The rite, according to Orobator, “evokes the memories of all members of the family, including the living dead and the yet-unborn who are *afflicted in any way* and in need of liberation.”¹⁷⁶ In the rite, Christ is “welcomed, initiated, accepted and proclaimed the liberator.”¹⁷⁷ Christ is then prayed by the worshipping community to free them, their land and their lives, of “diseases of all kinds, of unemployment and unfair economic structural adjustment programs, of setbacks, such as tribalism, ethnic hatred, division and violence.”¹⁷⁸

Stinton tells of how such narratives about Jesus as liberator is upheld not only by ordinary Christians, but also by the Church hierarchies and some intellectuals. She refers to some of her particular encounters with a Catholic Archbishop, a number of priests, religious sisters, and academicians.¹⁷⁹ The priests, for example, always referred to the Gospel of Luke 4:18-19, wherein is found “the programmatic summary of Jesus’ (liberating) mission.”¹⁸⁰

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim a year of favour
from the Lord.”

For Christians, the priests, and the preachers, this passage authenticates the fact that Christ is liberator not just for the people of his time, but for them who continue to proclaim him as such in Africa today. The passage is all the more assuring because, according to them, Jesus himself had expressed that this message of liberation is being fulfilled *today*, even as they themselves in Africa are decreeing and listening to it (Lk 4:21). So, they uphold their

¹⁷⁴ Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 77-78.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 79. Italics in the original.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁷⁹ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 207-208.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

firm belief that Christ continues to exercise his liberating power in those specific terms, underlined in the passage quoted above.

Another interesting encounter that Stinton presents in order to show how the image of liberator is held and functions at the grassroots level is her encounter with Kikuyu philosopher (to her surprise), Gerald Wanjohi, who without mincing words shares his complete acceptance of Jesus as liberator.¹⁸¹ In all these encounters, the Kenyan Catholic religious sister Marie Gacambi's observation, Stinton says, is striking at the heart of the issue concerning Jesus as liberator. Sister Gacambi speaks passionately about it in these words presented by Stinton:

“I see Jesus as a liberator – I take it more or less as the saviour. Because I don't see saving just in spiritual terms; the African sees the totality of the person. So it is helping me to acquire the fullness of life in all aspects, sociological, psychological, economic, political, spiritual. Because liberation that only looks at the political elements, that's not liberation. But for me, Jesus is enhancing the whole aspect.”¹⁸²

This confession and understanding of Jesus as liberator are vibrant, as Stinton gathers from further investigation, owing to the “articulated awareness of the socioeconomic and political dimensions of Jesus' liberation,” and its connection with the transformation of society.¹⁸³ It contrasts the dominant understanding of Jesus' liberation in terms of individual and personal liberty. An interviewee, Abraham Akrong, laments the undercutting of the communal, socio-political dimension and connection of Jesus's liberating power in the invocations of Christ as liberator by many Christians. Akrong rightly pinpoints this limitation, as Stinton tells, to the fact that “Christianity was presented with an emphasis on individual salvation before God, so that people don't often connect individual salvation with the redemption of society.”¹⁸⁴ Akrong explains that,

“...it is because African traditional religion itself, which also controls our evaluation of Christianity, still is more for personal well-being and welfare...So, people see religion as a spiritual source for protection from spirits at work. The other dimension, that you are called to certain change, *to transform society*, is not developed.”¹⁸⁵

I shall speak more to this limitation in the grassroots christological imagination also in this section under the heading “individualistic and materialistic vision of salvation.” Let us now examine the third image of Christ that is also popular in the grassroots Christian communities.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 207-208.

¹⁸² Ibid., 208.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 209.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

3.1.3. Christ Our King

From our discussion of the grassroots christological images of healer and liberator, which are dominant in African Christianity, it is clear that in the effort to express their understanding of Jesus' identity and significance, Christians and theologians alike draw upon categories from their own religious-cultural, historical, social and political experiences. Within the context of these experiences, the issue of leadership has been – and still remains – very critical. The late Nigerian literary critic, Chinua Achebe, captured it quite poignantly in his book *The Trouble with Nigeria*. In the opening lines of the work Achebe wrote: “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership.”¹⁸⁶ In his last book *There was a Country*, published shortly before his death, he still maintained that the failure of African regeneration, renewal and transformation is traceable to poor leadership.¹⁸⁷

Like the Nigerian novelist, theologians also recognise the problem of leadership as a critical backdrop for christological exploration in Africa. Also, Ghanaian theologian, John Pobee, remarks that although the understanding and exercise of authority in various African communities differ, “leadership concept and practice can be very powerful avenue for articulating the answer to the question ‘Whom do you Africans say that I am?’”¹⁸⁸ That is to say, leadership, as Stinton also observes, “is a very important foothold for understanding Jesus Christ” in Africa.¹⁸⁹ And for many Christians and theologians, “Jesus represents both the fulfilment of leadership expectations in traditional African thought and of current yearnings for liberation in all dimensions of life.”¹⁹⁰ He is seen and understood to embody “the people’s ongoing aspirations for the (re)establishment of God’s kingdom and dominion.”¹⁹¹

So, among the several christological images appropriated in relation to Jesus' leadership in contemporary African Christianity is king. It is an image of Christ that is in line with the African Christian imagination and quest for authentic leadership – a quest that is still prevailing in today's African society. Just as in some strands of Jewish socio-religious understanding, the image is used to express the African Christian experience of Christ as one who will offer imminent access to a domain of unassailable security and well-being.¹⁹² The image is vibrant, for instance, among the stranded masses of Nigeria, my mother country, the largest in West Africa. This is obvious during the traditional annual liturgical feast of Christ the king, one of the most celebrated religious occasions in the year. During the feast, there are usually throngs of people in long processions moving ahead and following behind the Blessed Sacrament lifted on a height for adoration. There are many

¹⁸⁶ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1983), 1.

¹⁸⁷ See Chinua Achebe, *There was a Country: A Memoir* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2012).

¹⁸⁸ John Pobee, “In Search of Christology in Africa,” in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, ed. John Pobee (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 17.

¹⁸⁹ Stinton, “Jesus Christ, Living Water in Africa Today,” 439; idem, “Jesus – Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God,” 36-37.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 440.

¹⁹¹ Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 70.

¹⁹² Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, “The Idea of the Kingdom of God in African Theology,” *Studia Missionalia* 46 (1997): 327-357, at 330.

tuneful songs and energetic dancing by what is usually a large crowd of people. As the procession leads on through the towns and villages, the crowd would, time and again, burst into thunderous roar each time the Blessed Sacrament is lifted higher. They would hail, *Jesus Igweee...Christ the King!*¹⁹³ During the more sober part of the celebration, the issues of bad governance and poor leadership were always at the fore, in the sermons, in the prayers, and in the vibrating invocations of Christ as king. Jesus is proclaimed as the ideal king whom everyone in positions of leadership should look up to. In fact, in many quarters both during and after the feast, Jesus is prayed to exercise his kingly might and power in Nigeria, a country in which the problem is considered to be simply and squarely that of leadership and bad governance.¹⁹⁴ So, like the first-century Jewish messianic expectations or hope, the Nigerian religious people has a certain nationalistic-political understanding of the kingship of Jesus.

The king image and its understanding in this narrow sense of expectation is also dominant in other countries of tropical Africa like Ghana, Kenya and Uganda.¹⁹⁵ Drawing upon the experience amongst the Akan people of Ghana, Stinton underscores that the image of Christ as king “indicates the local belief that traditional leadership expectations are enacted” and embodied by Jesus.¹⁹⁶ Stinton refers to the example of Afua Kuma, a non-literate lay woman in rural Ghana who proclaims and celebrates the kingship of Jesus Christ in these words: “Mere chiefs and kings are not his equals though filled with glory and power, wealth and blessings, and royalty in the greatest abundance. But of them of all, he is the leader, and the chiefs with all their glory follow after him.”¹⁹⁷

There is another popular African song in which Christ is referred to as “the King of kings.”¹⁹⁸ He is the exemplary king, for he combines “religious, social, and political leadership.”¹⁹⁹ Congolese theologian, François Kabasélé, discusses how the traditional image of the Bantu chiefs informs the Bantu Christian belief “that Christ Jesus is the one to whom the title of king or chief belongs.”²⁰⁰ His work is a good illustration of the approach by some African theologians who begin from the African culture to trace elements that resonate with what the bible says about the identity and personality of Christ. I shall discuss that in the next chapter when I review the image of king in the works of Ukachukwu Chris Manus. In the light of this cultural approach, Kabasélé maintains that for the Bantu Christians, “the prerogatives of a Bantu king are seen to have been fully realized by Jesus

¹⁹³ See also Chris Ukachukwu Manus, “Jesu Kristi Oba: A Christology of ‘Christ the King’ among the Indigenous Christian Churches in Yorubaland, Nigeria,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991): 311-330.

¹⁹⁴ Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 1.

¹⁹⁵ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 177-192. One of the earliest works that offers a historical account and description of kingdoms in Africa south of the Sahara is Basil Davidson’s *African Kingdoms* (New York, NY: Time-Life Books, 1966).

¹⁹⁶ Stinton, “Jesus Christ, Living Water in Africa Today,” 439. See also Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 106.

¹⁹⁷ Afua Kuma cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 177.

¹⁹⁸ See Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 70-72.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ François Kabasélé, “Christ as Chief,” in Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 103.

Christ.”²⁰¹ All power belongs to him for him alone is the conqueror, and the greatest “defender and protector of the people.”²⁰²

Stinton mentions Peter Sarpong, a prominent Ghanaian Catholic bishop, who affirms that “Jesus Christ is indeed a great personality whose life conforms to what the Asante expect a great king to be...He is our healer, our liberator...and so, our *leader* par excellence.”²⁰³ This means that the image ties in together with the African appropriation of Christ as healer and liberator. African Christians imagine and express that Jesus’s power to heal and liberate consists in his kingship, and that Christ the king is a perfect exemplar of the kind of leaders Africans are in dire need of. Many Christians appreciate the healing activities of Jesus as a definitive affirmation of the all-inclusiveness of God’s reign proclaimed by Jesus. Jesus’s identity and work as healer and liberator are expressions of his “profound sympathy, of co-suffering (Matt 14:4), similar to giving leadership to confused people (Mk 6:3; Mt 9:36).”²⁰⁴ Therefore, his healings and other acts of liberation are linked with the coming of the kingdom of God in which Christ also reigns as king.²⁰⁵ And that his kingship is exercised in his authority and power over all diseases and situations of oppression (Mt 10:1); that Jesus could and will heal all diseases and liberate them from all oppression because he is a king. He is the one whom God anointed and commissioned to assist God in the (re)establishment of God’s kingdom of well-being, life in freedom, and justice.

We have now reached the point at which we can try to summarize who the ordinary African Christian people say the Son of Man is; how they try to account for their experience and expressions of Jesus’ identity and significance in certain images. After all that has gone before, it is obvious that the response of African Christians to the identity and mission of Jesus is inspired by their faith in him as the Son of God, true God and true Man – one who is fully divine and fully human. Their response is also driven by their continued, perennial longing for the change he brings and can bring to their social conditions. Hence, they encounter and proclaim him in such images as healer, liberator and king. The images reinforce their belief in him, to use a common parlance, as a “miracle worker.”²⁰⁶ The key assumption that underpins their christological thinking and confessions as such is the belief that Jesus Christ is a saviour and a solution to their spiritual and material problems.²⁰⁷ As Ezigbo observes, “the idea of Jesus as a saviour or a solution to spiritual and material problems is central to the grassroots Christologies of many Christians.”²⁰⁸ This is probably a way to capture the images of “Christ our healer”, “Christ our liberator,” and “Christ our king” that we have examined.

In presenting their meanings, functionality and actual operation at the grassroots level, it is obvious that Christians rely heavily on the gospels, on the testimony of the early

²⁰¹ Ibid., 105.

²⁰² Ibid., 106.

²⁰³ Ibid., 177. Emphasis mine.

²⁰⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation*, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 65-66. Emphasis mine.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 66.

²⁰⁶ See Keener, “Miracle Accounts Beyond Antiquity: Examples in Africa,” in *Miracles*, 309-358.

²⁰⁷ Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christology*, 133.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 134.

Christian community, and on the Church's creedal formulation. They depend on these, wittingly or unwittingly, in order to work out their own experience and understanding of Jesus' identity and significance. Therefore, interacting more critically with these sources (as I will do in the fourth section) is important for a deeper appreciation of the legitimacy, and, at same time, the limits of their christological imagination of Christ's life and mission, on the one hand, and for unravelling the christological notions that might help us lay out more systematically how belief relates to the quest for social transformation, on another hand. Before doing so, permit me to explore some of the limitations of the grassroots christological imagination or narratives.

3.2. Limitations of the Christological Narratives

I have underlined the fact that the images of Christ as healer, liberator and king are the people's ways of understanding Christ and proclaiming the work of his redemption. This understanding and proclamation are rendered concretely in terms of the quest for social transformation, which they hope Christ alone will bring to them, and can bring about in their society. Nevertheless, the danger remains that the functionality these images have, that is, the way in which they are 'used', or their actual operation at the grassroots level may attenuate the potentials they bear towards the transformation of societies in the context. Hence, in this subsection we subject these popular images to a certain theological and practical (social) scrutiny towards highlighting some of the limits.

I have neither the wish nor the competence to embark on the exercise with the tools of the social sciences. Rather, I will do so, first and foremost, as a participating observer, as one who has been present among believers, has shared – and still shares – in the life and conditions of some of the believing communities in which Christ is understood and expressed in the images described above. That is to say, what I do in this section, and in other parts of this dissertation, is not "an exercise in intellectual or speculative weightlessness," to use an expression by Orobator.²⁰⁹ In addition, I am able to point out these limits in the manner also as a fellow and honest believer, to whom it has been granted the grace to undergo a training in matters of faith and revelation. The training enables me to subject the signs of religiosity, the symbols of belief, or precisely the imagination and images of Christ, to critical examination by the light of reason and support of modern scholarship.

My aim here is to distill from the grassroots christological images the essential core which can be appropriated for the well-being of people, and can provide resources that motivate Christians to become more committed to the work of transforming society – a society whose key indices, as gleaned from the christological images, are health, life together in freedom, and social justice. Hence, what I am trying to do in what follows, on a much smaller scale, is considered crucial in the work of exploring how christological belief can be a source of societal transformation. Moreover, the insights garnered in doing so could be appreciated as faithful perspectives of a participating researcher; that is, one

²⁰⁹ Orobator, "Method and Context," 124.

who has ‘descended’ into and still “dwells” in the context of my fellow African Christians, and is able “to engage vital issues and questions at the interstices of faith and life.”²¹⁰

Systematic theologians have increasingly recognized the need for critically exploring the limits of and in Christian belief. I will cite just two of these theologians, Miroslav Volf and Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator. While Volf refers to such limitations as “the ill-effects or malfunctions” of Christian faith, Orobator designates them and the way they are made to often operate, particularly in African Christianity, as “pathological performance.”²¹¹ I identify such inadequacies in the nature of Christians’ belief about Christ simply as “limitations.” Early in his book *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*, Yale Croatian-American theologian, Miroslav Volf, carries out what he considers as “countering malfunctions of faith.”²¹² To Volf, doing that is fundamental in any effort to distill the potential of faith in Jesus Christ as resource for Christian commitment in the social sphere. The same of train of reasoning and move is followed in Orobator’s *Religion and Faith in Africa*. According to Orobator, “religious imagination continues to inform and shape the attitudes of Africans.”²¹³ So that “distilling” and promoting the “prophetic practice” of Christian faith in Africa’s social sphere, requires a critique of the ways in which the faith can be abused following a limited or narrow understanding of Jesus’ identity and work. For this reason, any attempt – like mine in this dissertation – to explore the socially transformative potential of christological beliefs, and to realign them with efforts to bring about a transformed society for the flourishing of all, must be able to highlight the limitations of the christological beliefs. It must be able to “describe and evaluate” them, and in view of offering adequate critical but constructive response to them.²¹⁴ There are four of the limitations, which, in my view, are obvious from my examination of the grassroots christological imagination and images.

3.2.1. Absolutization of Christ’s Image

The proclamation of the “almighty” power of Jesus Christ is evident in the grassroots Christologies. A majority of African Christians consider their proclamation of Jesus as “all powerful” as the unique expression of their apprehension of his divine identity as “true God”, which we already touched on in the preceding subsection.²¹⁵ It is their own manner of confessing Jesus’ perfect divinity. This confession as such in the understanding of Christians means that Jesus – and *Jesus alone* – is the agent of their well-being and

²¹⁰ Ibid., 124-125. See also my discussion of this idea in “The Method of Theology: By Way of Descent and Encounter,” in “The Word is Among Us: Sketching the Contours and Significance of Lawrence Nwankwo’s Contextualized-Constructive Theology,” *Ministerium: Journal of Contextual Theology* 5 (2019): 47-69, at 64-66.

²¹¹ Miroslav Volf, “Countering Faith Malfunctions,” in *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 4-5; Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 81 and 88-95.

²¹² Volf, “Countering Faith Malfunctions,” in *A Public Faith*, 3-54.

²¹³ Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 80.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 80-81.

²¹⁵ For a socio-exegetical investigation of this idea among Christians in West Africa, see Anthony Iffen Umoren, *Paul and Power Christology: Exegesis and Theology of Romans 1:3-4 in Relation to Popular Power Christology in an African Context* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007).

flourishing. And Jesus is so because he was and is none other than God. For many Christians and their preachers, Jesus ought to be thought of as such if he is to bring about the desired social change. Not to think of Jesus as fully divine, and even, as *only God*, as one hears in so many churches, is to demean the redemption he brings. It takes a “Jesus” who is God, and nothing less than God, to heal people of all their infirmities, to liberate Africans from all sorts of oppression and injustice, and to lead them to the green pastures of life in freedom and integral well-being. Only one whose divinity is so charged could perform such miracles, Christians think.

Apart from the overt marginalization of Jesus’ human identity in this way of thinking about his divinity, this tendency to absolutize the latter often leads to what Orobator justly qualifies as “pathological performance,” a usual turn of faith practices in the Christian landscape of Africa. Orobator describes it thus:

“[P]athological performance is a by-product of a flawed Christology generated by reductionistic thinking...[I]t reduces the function, role, or meaning of the entire teaching, mission, and gospel of Christ to a weapon for opposing, taming, neutralizing, and defeating evil incarnated in a coterie of malevolent spirits. Besides, it lays undue stress on the functionality of this gospel to procure...prosperity in the form of wealth and health. Accordingly, Jesus Christ becomes primarily and exclusively the prized purveyor of material prosperity and the great guarantor of victory.”²¹⁶

This is a sort of instrumentalization of divinity which comes often across in a way that tends to be a control of Christ in order to establish a good life in the social sphere. Jesus Christ, as Orobator pointed out in his critique of this limitation, is pressed into service for the good of those who call on him as healer, liberator and king. It is obvious that such performance leads to a certain reductionism of Jesus’ personality and power to “utilitarian purposes, as is sometimes evidenced, for example in the prosperity gospel churches.”²¹⁷ In these churches, Jesus Christ is often invoked as a *deus ex machina*. This, among other consequences, gives rise to a vision of salvation that is individualistic, privatized, exclusively defined over against others, and even divisive. Such a vision, whose one-sided focus, as Nwankwo rightly captures, “is more on personal rebirth to the neglect of social rebirth, on personal ‘morality’ and the exclusion of social concerns understood in terms of commitment to the realization of a life-enhancing socio-economic and political...field of action for all.”²¹⁸ This problem is further examined in the next subsection.

²¹⁶ Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 92-93.

²¹⁷ Stinton, “Jesus – Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God: Aspects of Popular Christology in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 39. For a socio-theological description and critique of this problem in popular Christianity in Africa, especially in the so-called “gospel of prosperity,” see Lawrence Nwankwo, “You have received the Spirit of Power...” (2 Tim. 1:7): Reviewing the Prosperity Message in the Light of a Theology of Empowerment,” *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 22, no. 1 (2002): 56-77. The problem receives a much more detailed analysis in Nwankwo’s doctoral dissertation, “From Power Christianity to Christianity that Empowers: Towards a Theology of Empowerment in the Nigerian Context” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Faculty of Theology, KU Leuven, 2004), 293-324; and still in a recent article, “African Christianity and the Challenge of Prosperity Gospel,” *Ministerium: Journal of Contextual Theology* 5 (2019): 11-27.

²¹⁸ Nwankwo, “You have received the Spirit of Power...” (2 Tim. 1:7): Reviewing the Prosperity Message in the Light of a Theology of Empowerment,” 56. See also Ruth Marshall, “Power in the Name of Jesus’: Social Transformation and Pentecostalism in Western Nigeria ‘Revisited’” in *Legitimacy and the State in*

3.2.2. Individualistic and Materialistic Vision of Salvation

Another limitation of the grassroots christological imagination in African Christianity can be described in terms of the individualistic and materialistic vision of salvation, a privatization and commodification of the very notion of salvation. This comes across often as a sort of “functional reduction” (Volf’s phrase) of christological belief. The limitation consists in the Christians’ apprehension of Christ’s identity and work largely in terms of their own individual and material well-being, what Christ will do for them in solving their physical, personal and social problems, in meeting their own individual needs for survival and good life. Such an emphasis is a common turn that the expressions and practices of belief in Africa take; and it is somewhat understandable in the throes of enduring socio-economic and political crises in many parts of the continent. Hence, quite often, aside resigning to fate, nothing is left for many poor and vulnerable people to do except to hold on, in very different outward forms, to a Christ from whom alone they expect their help shall come (see Ps 121:1-2). That dynamic leads to a dominant interpretation of Jesus’ identity and work in terms of material reward to those who place all their hope in him.

Be that as it may, attention still needs to be drawn to how such an understanding about Jesus’ life and work tends to be self-referential, self-centered, and undermines a common commitment to transform the society in which the Christians live not just for themselves, but for the good of all. Needless to say, the significance of encounter with Christ *as* God is undercut or lost sight of. When this becomes the case in the way Christ is confessed or invoked, “churches and religious language morph into locations where God may have once been active, shaping people and their social realities, but in which God now lies dead, no longer a transformative reality, alive only as a topographic memory.”²¹⁹ In quite a number of cases in many African churches, as Orobator demonstrates, the encounter or the pretense of which is used to manipulate and exploit the practitioners of faith for narrow economic ends and self-serving agendas of their religious leaders and their cohorts.²²⁰ Jean Marc Éla had drawn attention to the consequences of this pitfall, and had also suggested a way out of it when he writes:

“An individualistic presentation of the questions of salvation leaves the African helpless. Christian ceremonies seem to have been unable to create true links of solidarity that extend into the invisible world and promise peace to people faced with the adversities of life. Hence, there is a need to re-create small communities, within which Christians can find security about all dimensions of their being through collective decision-making.”²²¹

Twentieth Century Africa, ed. Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 213-246.

²¹⁹ Volf, *A Public Faith*, 11.

²²⁰ Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 94. See also Volf, *A Public Faith*, 10. Volf describes this limitation in what he regards as “ascent malfunction.” According to Volf, the ascent malfunction “consists in functional reduction of faith.” According to him, it happens when Christians and their representatives “lose faith in the significance of the encounter with God as God and employ religious language perspectives and practices whose content and driving force do not come from or are not integrally related to the core of the faith, . . . or to promote present desirable ends.” In such situations, the living God (Christ) is reduced to a function of the peoples’ and the prophets’ religious language.

²²¹ Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 146.

Éla's observation points to how such an overly individualistic and materialistic quest in the Christians' appropriation of Jesus leaves the African Christians helpless. That is to say, the agency of the Christians is not cultivated, enhanced nor empowered, since what Christians are brought to do is to call and wait on Christ who will work out the transformation of their society entirely for them and them alone. I will come back to this element shortly.

Suffice to say that this tendency to think of the flourishing Christ brings in such individualistic terms is because Christ is not presented as one with whom a Christian can enter into a living and transforming relationship: a relationship that fills one with the life of Christ given for the life of the world (Jn 6:51), for all people, and not just for Christians. A lack of this way of imagining Christ at the grassroots level, apparently, attenuates and dilutes the transformative potential of christological belief.²²² Needless to say that an isolated individual or exclusionary community of believers is fragile and largely helpless to evoke radical and long-lasting transformation or regeneration of the social order. By and just for ourselves, we accomplish very little. Hence, Christians must be challenged to open up and reach out to others, fellow Christians and non-Christians alike, in the quest for common purpose. And the socially transformative christological belief, which I pursue in the present research, is one that, I hope, should re-orient the understanding and shift the ensuing attitude of Christians from one of individualized and materialistic salvation to one of collective awakening, solidarity and service to all beings, Christians and non-Christians alike.

3.2.3. *Disengagement of the Human Agency*

The second limitation which follows from the first I have just discussed is an uncritical engagement of the human agency of Christians in the way they look to Christ as the *sole* bringer of social change. There is no doubt the letter to the Hebrews enjoins us, as many African Christians uphold, “to look unto Jesus as the author and perfecter of our faith and life” (Heb. 12:2). One perceptible consequence of such gaze on Christ is the empowerment of the believer to replicate the transforming and transformative reality of the Christ (see 1 Cor 3:18). That is to say, by looking unto and invoking Christ, Christians should become empowered and emancipated to exercise the transforming power of Christ, to become themselves agents of his healing, liberation, and redemption. However, it looks as if in the case of many African Christians, their own invocation of Christ or waiting upon him, occludes the engagement of their own human agency and even makes it redundant. Their own proclamation of Christ seems to heighten their “anthropological poverty,” to use a phrase common to African theologians. This anthropological pauperization, according to Cameroonian theologian, Engelbeth Mveng, consists in despoiling the African person, believers and non-believers alike, not only of what they have, but of everything that constitutes their human agency, their being and essence.²²³ Cécé Kolié captures and

²²² Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 94.

²²³ Engelbeth Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World,” 154-165; idem, “Third World Theology – What Theology? What Third World?: Evaluation by an African Delegate,” in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 217-221, at 220.

critiques this uncritical engagement of the human agency, for example, in the way the images of Christ are proclaimed when he laments that,

“Our liturgies do not celebrate human beings fighting disease, or struggling so hard to get up on their feet, or striving to be free. Instead, our liturgical hymns sing the glory of the Sole Initiator, the Master of Life par excellence, or the Chief of Chiefs, while our spiritual exhortations by and large content themselves with saying, “Offer it up, this injustice, shoulder your cross daily, have confidence in Christ who has suffered as much as you!”²²⁴

In challenging such sentiments in the way Christ (as healer) is presented to and proclaimed in African Christianity, I make Cécé Kolié’s contention my own when he says that, “to give Christ the (image) of healer in Africa will not be feasible until the manifold gifts of healing possessed by all of our Christian communities have begun to manifest themselves.”²²⁵ Kolié’s observation reveals in concrete terms the limitation in many Christians’ imagination of Christ not only as healer, but in other images in which they do so. Even though their imagination of Christ is manifested in very active and dynamic practices of faith, there is still an underlying presence of passivity in the way they do so. This points to another limitation that I shall discuss next.

3.2.4. “Energetic Passivity” of Faith and Hope

A form of this energetic passivity, or what Orobator rightly captures as “religious exuberance” of faith and hope, could also be traced in the understanding and the way of the christological expressions at the grassroots.²²⁶ This is obvious, for example, within the context of the dominant proclamation and celebration of Christ as king. There is an understanding of this image in the light of the eschatological dimension of the kingdom of God. Under the guise of upholding this eschatological resonance of the kingdom Christ will enthrone, the claim is made that Christians should be concerned exclusively with spiritual matters.²²⁷ They should focus on preparing “for the ‘kingdom of heaven’ not for the ‘Kingdom of God’ here on earth.”²²⁸ Many others “justify themselves by suggesting that transformation of the social order is a matter of the future.”²²⁹ Orobator sheds more light on this limitation in the following words:

“Effectively this idea of the kingdom of God serves as a panacea for contemporary social crises. The result is too often a social escapism that denies the structural roots of the crises and freezes Christian social action or responsibility in the innocuous rhetoric of an otherworldly kingdom of God. In this context the radically subversive nature of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus pales into *social passivity*.”²³⁰

²²⁴ Kolié, “Jesus as Healer?” 142.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Orobator, “*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa’s Burden of (Under)Development,” 332.

²²⁷ Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*,” 229, cited in Orobator, “The Idea of the Kingdom of God in African Theology,” 332.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid. Italics mine.

There is also another aspect to this limitation in the grassroots christological narratives. Quite often, the resources of faith are understood and reduced to messages that energize Christians to pursue individual success rather than serve the wellbeing of all. Individuals strive or rather believe that Christ will fend for them, sometimes at the expense of others. As a result, they engage in so many religious activities as I mentioned already, long night vigils, protracted prayers and fasting, uncountable celebrations of the Eucharist, strict observance of spiritual activities that are often recommended by their “prophets”.²³¹ Many Christians in their imagination of Christ conceive that the energetic exercise in the spiritual activities will guarantee access to the blessings of social transformation that come from Christ in the form of healing, material success, wealth, financial breakthroughs, and socio-political status and well-being.²³² In these consists their belief and hope, which move them to invoke Christ in such practices.

At the same time, Lawrence Nwankwo expresses the limitation of the grassroots christologies in relation to the subject of hope in the following way:

“The principle of hope that underlies the practice in popular religiosity...while it sustains individuals with the promise that God is a “super-power”, able to annihilate all the opponents and thus break through enemy lines for the flow of divine blessings, it does not root out greed and other ills and open up people to commit to social change.”²³³

In this sense, what one sees is that many Christians, with these images, seek consolation in their desolation, to borrow Sobrino’s expression.²³⁴ Christ is seen and understood in such a way that one will have neither the reason nor the greatest motivation to carry out the mission of Christ in labouring for the transformation of the society.²³⁵ Volf considers such ill-effect of understanding Christ in terms of “idleness of faith” and hope.²³⁶ Such a view, according to him, could be categorised in terms of the “sin of omission,” in which many Christians fail to do what they should do in the name of Christ.²³⁷ Therefore, how faith and hope in Christ are to be rightly understood, and adequately lived, as a way of participating in the life and mission of Christ, and bearing witness to him, who embodies human well-being and lives it out *for* other lives, remains a challenge in African Christianity. It is also theological challenge, which Nwankwo rightly suggests requires a critical and constructive “articulation of a more balanced theology of hope...that connects one to the society.”²³⁸ The consequence of this “Christian hope-filled faith” according to Nwankwo is “the commitment to actions that will impact the unfolding of history towards the enthronement

²³¹ See Orobator’s dramatic description of some of these activities, while citing the account by Emmanuel Katongole, in “A Marketplace of Faiths,” in *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 51-52.

²³² See Orobator’s description of a related phenomenon and other useful materials on the practices of the gospel of prosperity in Africa in “*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa’s Burden of (Under)Development,” 332. See also Nwankwo, “African Christianity and the Challenge of Prosperity Gospel,” 11-27.

²³³ Lawrence Nwankwo, “Theology of Hope and Value Orientation in Nigeria: Towards a Shift in Everyday Practice,” *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 16 (2019): 73-87, at 81-82.

²³⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 11-12.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-17.

²³⁶ Volf, *A Practical Faith*, 13.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ Nwankwo, “Theology of Hope and Value Orientation in Nigeria, 73-87.

of the values of God’s kingdom which consists of truth, justice, love and peace.”²³⁹ This insight inspires part of the discussion in the third chapter.

In critiquing the dominant understanding of the images of Christ in the grassroots Christian communities in Africa, a sort of an insider’s fair analysis of the phenomena I also share in, I have only sought to show their limitations, and also their danger in the way they are often allowed to function in contemporary African Christianity. For the purpose of this research, the real danger, amongst others, is the obstruction to a more critically enlivened, engaged, embodied, and collaborative commitment to transforming human society in Africa. This challenges us to go back to the gospels, the early New testament witnesses, and to one of the earliest formal account of person of Jesus. Hopefully, they might offer us fresh possibilities and the most adequate insights for exploring the relation between christological belief and the work of social transformation.

4. (Re-)Connecting the Narratives

I have described the grassroots Christologies in contemporary African Christianity by means of three christological images – healer, liberator and king. Here I seek to critically engage the sources that inform their proclamation. In doing so, I now intend to pose a test to the content of these christological images: have they secured continuity and agreement with the original theological content of christological beliefs, that is, the meaning and significance of the identity and work of Jesus Christ as presented in the ‘classical’ *loci Christologici*? By saying this, I do not lose sight of the transitory and contextual composition of every christological testimony or formulation which often uses contingent conceptual tools for its (re)presentation. That said, I raise the question because I wish to probe further, and therefrom, highlight the theological content of the grassroots Christologies. This is meant still to correct views of grassroots Christologies, in some scholarly circles, as mere rhetoric, vagaries of enchanted Christian imagination and narrative, wishful thinking, opium of the people (in the Karl Marxian term), or some sort of christological delusion which undercuts the response to the real and complex socio-political problems or challenges that inform them.²⁴⁰ There is no doubt that some of these criticisms could be justified given the way the images of Christ are sometimes confessed and translated in the African Christian and social context. However, I argue that each of these christological images that have emerged and remained dominant in African Christianity reflects genuine and helpful insights into the identity and work of Christ, especially when evaluated in the light of the christological sources we shall consider shortly.

In any case, a theological account of how African Christians, particularly at the grassroots level, experience and understand the identity and significance of Jesus Christ must not only be aware of the dominant christological imagination and images. The account

²³⁹ Ibid., 83.

²⁴⁰ For a description of grassroots Christologies in African Christianity in such terms, see, for example, Victor I. Ezigbo, “Rhetoric of God’s Empowerment in Nigerian Christianity: Its Import for Christian Identity and Social Responsibility,” 199-220; Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 13-28, 107-124.

must also be able to critically interact with what is generally considered the basic or normative sources for the historical development of Christology.²⁴¹ It should be able to test and evaluate the christological images in light of these sources. In the process of such interaction and evaluation, the legitimacy and justice, and obviously, the limits and problems of these christological images and imagination will be x-rayed. That is to say, the interaction with the classical sources will help to provide objective criteria whereby one is able to inveigh against the possible distortion and abuse of faith in Christ's identity and work.

The interaction will also help in the way of responding adequately to an ongoing debate by theologians. They question whether, in the last analysis, the presentation of the popular images of Christ in African Christianity is just a projection of determinate social conditions of people. Scholars contend there is a risk of suggesting that the christological images only *lead* to social transformation, or even that there is a tendency to present them as simply offering the *resources* for social transformation, as if the main goal is the social transformation rather than *faith* in Jesus Christ, and a deeper *understanding* of who Christ is and the meaning of his life in the world. In such case, Christology would be either nothing but a manner of speaking about the social conditions and the concerns for their transformation.²⁴² To be sure, these views are clearly avoided in the research.

Having said all that, the purpose of the section is not to give a more or less comprehensive survey of the discussion about sources of African Christology, or even to offer an evaluation of the ensuing debates concerning the approach in the use of the sources in African christological reflection. My modest effort in what follows is simply to further evaluate the grassroots christological images we have described in the light of what John Mbiti, one of the leading pioneers of African theology, long ago referred to as “the pillars” of christological reflection in Africa, and which I argue also inform the grassroots Christologies in African Christianity, however imperfectly.²⁴³ I shall focus on three of these pillars already mentioned: sacred scripture, the faith (religious) experience of the early

²⁴¹ See Stinton, “Jesus Christ, Living Water in Africa Today,” 430-431; idem, “Jesus of Africa,” 289-295.

²⁴² The question is also raised within the context of the debate about how the interpretation of the figure of Christ is to be carried out in Latin American Christologies. For a discussion of the issue, see José Míguez Bonino, “Introduction: Who is Jesus Christ in Latin America Today?,” in *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, ed. José Míguez Bonino, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 1-8.

²⁴³ The four pillars of christological reflections in Africa resonate somewhat with the *loci classici* of Christologies that Kasper discusses in his *Jesus the Christ*. According to Mbiti, the first of the four pillars is the sacred scripture, which for him is the utmost reference point in every christological discussion. The second is what he refers to as the Christology of the “older Churches”, by which he means the traditional christological formulations of the earliest councils. The third pillar is the traditional African worldview. The fourth is the living experience of Church in Africa. See John S. Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” in *Christ and the Younger Churches: Theological Contributions from Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, Theological Collections 15, ed. Georg F. Vicedom (London: SPCK, 1972), 51-62, at 51-52. For a recent discussion of these pillars as “a helpful measuring rod for assessing and discussing the contours of African Christology,” see Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 116-117.

Christian community, and traditional creedal formulation.²⁴⁴ Thus, the combined appeal to these sources for an evaluation of these grassroots christological images offers us good reasons to affirm their proper theological status. For with and through these images, African Christians try to bear fresh witness to the Christ who is alive and active in their context.²⁴⁵

The aim, therefore, is to demonstrate that these grassroots christological images are inspired, even though not very critically in the case of vast majority of Christians, by the normative sources of Christology. Hence a more critical interaction with the sources might allow us to see how the life, mission and praxis of Christ unfolded within the framework of (1) his relationship with the Father and with the people he encountered, (2) the empowerment and exercise of his own agency and those of others, and (3) his commitment to praxis – the three christological notions for disclosing the socially transformative potential of christological beliefs.²⁴⁶ Each of these are notions which Christians, as we saw in our examination of the three images, are yet to grasp in their vibrant proclamation and invocation of Christ. For my task and purpose in this section, I will focus on looking at how the images emerge and function within the context of (1) the New Testament narratives, (2) the testimony of the early Christian community, and (3) the Chalcedonian creedal formulation about Christ.

4.1. Christ in the Gospels

The resourceful role of the sacred scripture, particularly the New Testament, for an account and interpretation of Jesus' identity and mission is not contested in christological discourse, more so, in Africa.²⁴⁷ John Mbiti was right to assert that, “nowhere else today is the world of the Bible as real or as alive as it is in Africa,” and in African theology (Christology).²⁴⁸ Scholars have offered reasons why many African Christians make easy reference to the gospel evidence, for example, of the healing activity of Jesus to support their understanding of his person and work of Jesus.²⁴⁹ The gospel “provides divine revelation about Jesus

²⁴⁴ For a discussion of these sources as the *loci classici* of Christologies, see Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 14-16, 218-227. See also Stinton's conclusion on the “criteria for critical engagement with African Christologies,” in *Jesus of Africa*, 45-46.

²⁴⁵ For a discussion of this idea see Daniel Migliore, “Christology in Context: The Doctrinal and Contextual Tasks of Christology Today,” *Interpretation* 49 (1995): 242-254.

²⁴⁶ I recall here a work, an edited volume by the North American Jesuit theologian, John Haughey, in which the sources of Christian faith are explored for social transformation. See John C. Haughey, ed., *Faith that Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1977).

²⁴⁷ See, for example, Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Kwame Bediako, “Biblical Exegesis in the African Context – The Factor and Impact of the Translated Scriptures,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 6 (2003): 15-23; Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006); Paul Gifford, “The Bible in Africa: A Novel Usage in Africa's New Churches,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71, no. 2 (2008): 203-219.

²⁴⁸ John Mbiti, “The Bible in African Culture,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 27-39, at 38. See also John Mbiti, “The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology,” in *African Theology en Route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 83-94.

²⁴⁹ See Stinton, “Biblical and Theological Rationale,” in *Jesus of Africa*, 67-69; Ezigbo, “The Resourceful Role of the Bible,” in *Re-Imagining African Christology*, 110-114. Clarke, Christ as Healer Par Excellence,” in *African Christology*, 122-125.

Christ and the trustworthy record of the actual witnesses to him.”²⁵⁰ And many Christians consider the gospel as the “only major collections of books and epistles written about Jesus the Christ by some individuals who lived with him and/or experienced him in some ways.”²⁵¹ Referring to John Macquarrie, a twentieth century Scottish theologian and one of the greatest modern defenders of New Testament (biblical) Christology, Ezigbo further explains that, “although the knowledge that comes to us from the New Testament is mediated knowledge...Christians experience through the language even today something of the power of that person whom we call Jesus Christ.”²⁵² That is why many African Christians refer to the sacred scripture as the mainstay of their confession, belief and reflection about the identity and work of Christ.

However, the reference to the sacred scripture in the proclamation of Christ as healer, liberator and king is not enough to justify that these images as they are confessed by Christians capture a comprehensive view of the identity and work of Christ. As Tennent argues: “It is impossible to come up with a christological image that fully exhausts the glory of Christ.”²⁵³ There is no doubt that the popular images of Christ in African Christianity stems mainly from the abundant biblical accounts of the healing, liberative and saving acts of Jesus. A casual look at the New Testament reveals that. Yet a more pressing issue in the evaluation of the images is the way many African Christians employ the sacred scripture. Under the guise of the so-called spiritual sense of the bible, there is always a tendency to read and interpret the bible in a fundamentalist and literal way.²⁵⁴ This leads to the construction of a fictional Jesus from whom the people crave uncritically for healing, liberation and guidance. As a consequence, exaggerated implications are often drawn from the confession of Jesus’ identity and work. Such exaggerations could undermine authentic christological faith, and its socially transformative possibility.²⁵⁵ Hence, the need is always there to look critically again to the New Testament narratives, to see if we could grasp more fully the inner meaning and significance of Jesus’ life and ministry.

There is no doubt that all of the relevant Gospel stories and scenes of Jesus’ healing, liberating, and kingly life and mission cannot be analysed adequately here. I shall rely on the reflections of theologians and exegetes who have done so, expansively. People like Rowan Williams and Reimund Bieringer offer excellent analysis and profound perspectives about the meaning and significance of, for example, the healing and kingly figure of Christ, respectively.²⁵⁶ Rowan Williams argues that the healing episodes in the gospels, when looked at deeply and critically, surely with the eyes of faith, present a portrait of Jesus

²⁵⁰ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 111.

²⁵¹ Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christology*, 111.

²⁵² John Macquarrie, *Christology Revisited*, (London: SCM Press, 1998), 85, as cited in Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christology*, 111.

²⁵³ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 120.

²⁵⁴ I have discussed this in my Master’s Thesis. Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, “Significance of Scripture in Christology: Raymond Brown on the Role of Biblical Exegesis in the Church’s Christological Reflections” (unpublished master’s thesis, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, 2015).

²⁵⁵ Atansi, “Significance of Scripture in Christology,” 23. See also Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, x.

²⁵⁶ Rowan Williams, “Health and Healing,” in *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2017), 13-27. Riemund Bieringer, “‘My Kingship is Not of this World’ (Jn 18,36): The Kingship of Jesus and Politics,” in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology*, ed. T. Merrigan and J. Haers, 159-176.

Christ and open up to a different understanding about him and the meaning of his healing actions. According to Williams, “it is too simple to say only that Jesus heals people who are sick in mind and body and everyone is glad.”²⁵⁷ Williams goes on, “while that may be the bottom line in these stories, it is clear that the act of healing itself is again and again bound up with the overcoming of various exclusions, various kinds of alienation or isolation.”²⁵⁸ We will be missing the essential point “if we try to say (like many Christians in Africa) that the only ‘real’ healing is physical improvement, or ...some sort of inner transformation.”²⁵⁹ Williams rightly insists that, “neither of these will do, and neither of them does justice to how the New Testament relates stories of healing.”²⁶⁰

So, in order to offer a deeper biblical meaning of Christ as healer, Williams works through, and draws upon insights from the first four stories of healing in St. Mark’s Gospel: the healing of demoniac in the synagogue (Mk 1:21-28), the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mk 1:29-31), the healing of the leper (Mk 1 40-45), and the healing of the paralytic (Mk 2:1-12). He then shows, quite convincingly, that Jesus’ healing identity and ministry is about how God in Christ transforms the world by creating living relationship between the person and him (God) and with one another, by engaging the agency of the human person, and by enabling embodied practices. This idea, Williams acknowledges, is not so obvious at first sight even though it is present in the healing narratives. Drawing on the story about the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law, he writes: “...what we are seeing is how relationship with Jesus (Peter’s relationship) flows over into a healing relationship with those connected to the people related to Jesus.”²⁶¹ In this way, “relating to Jesus is not something that excludes other relationships, but rather something that brings further life and hope to them.”²⁶² Williams then concludes, also in view of all the other healing stories:

“...[W]hat is happening in Jesus’s healings is the restoration or extension of relation, inclusion in community, the bridging of a gulf between spirit and flesh. These people, as they are healed, come to be places newly inhabited – by love, by thanksgiving, by peace, by the sense of absolution. That is why healing, in these stories, is more than simply the act that restores physical health where there was physical or mental sickness.”²⁶³

Somewhere in the background, as Williams reflects and fills out further, is the fact of (1) enhanced relationship, “a brokenness, an emptiness, that needs to be addressed, and into which Jesus speaks.”²⁶⁴ What follows is then the experience of (2) empowered agency: “the act of healing frees the person to express what they are made and called to be, which is members of a community in which flesh gives voice to spirit and, and in so doing creates further networks of healing, integrating relation.”²⁶⁵ This experience of empowerment

²⁵⁷ Williams, “Health and Healing,” in *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today*, 18.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

opens up to (3) embodied practices, which mainly consists in cultivating “a new capacity,” a new way of inhabiting and thriving “more fully, more deeply and joyfully than we could ever have imagined,” the social space, the community into which one has been restored.²⁶⁶ Put simply, the healing stories in which Jesus is obviously exercising his healing, liberating, and kingly roles, are stories of how we learn to relate with God and with others, to become empowered, and to interact and act. They are stories of how relationship with Christ and with other human beings are enhanced, how the agency of the one and others with whom he or she comes in contact are activated as an overflow of the relationship, and how they become enabled to take on the representative roles that are proper to them as followers of Christ.

A similar train of reasoning is followed by the Leuven New Testament exegete, Reimund Bieringer in his interpretation of Jesus’ kingly identity and mission, in the essay already cited.²⁶⁷ Jesus’ self-identification and understanding as king (“Yes, I am a king” Jn 18:37) points back to his relation to the Father and relationship with other human beings, the exercise of his own agency, and acting for the transformation of the social order. From these perspectives, it becomes obvious, as Bieringer shows, that Jesus’ kingship goes beyond the “narrow nationalistic-political outlook,” in which it is often understood by the Jewish people at that time, and by many African Christians today.²⁶⁸ More to it, in his biblical analysis, Bieringer shows how Jesus’ identity and mission as king are revealed most definitively in his humiliation and in his “bearing witness to the truth,” even in the face of his trial before Pontus Pilate.²⁶⁹ Jesus’ kingship comes to light precisely in his *kenosis*, his self-giving in humble obedience to the Father (Phil 2:6-8).²⁷⁰ The fact that the “king” image, or title, to use Bieringer’s preferred expression, comes into prominence within the Johannine passion narrative (Jn 18:36-37) proves this point that Jesus’ kingship can be understood in mainly its kenotic sense, while not losing sight of its socio-political dimension.²⁷¹ And, in fact, the nationalistic-political tone or aspect of the image receives its utmost expression in Jesus’ kenotic being and act. As Bieringer puts it in the concluding part of his essay:

“Jesus keeps reminding people of the religious dimension of life and mission. But in doing so, he does not do away with the political dimension. He rather critiques it and reshapes it. The experience of first-century contemporaries of Jesus and John was that freedom fighters and messianic pretenders expected their followers to lay down their lives for their leaders. The Johannine Jesus does the exact opposite by laying down his

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 21-24. See also Rowan Williams, “Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics,” *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 29-51.

²⁶⁷ Bieringer, “‘My Kingship is Not of this World’ (Jn 18,36): The Kingship of Jesus and Politics,” 159-179. Equally useful for this investigation is the excellent study of “the Kingdom of God” in the work of John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 2 (New York, NY: Doubleday, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, 1994), 237-506. But for my intent here, I shall be referring mainly to Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator’s contextualized theological engagement of Meier’s work. Orobator, “The Idea of the Kingdom of God in African Theology,” 327-357.

²⁶⁸ Bieringer, “‘My Kingship is Not of this World’ (Jn 18,36): The Kingship of Jesus and Politics,” 159.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 175.

²⁷⁰ I am also indebted to For my understanding of Jesus’ kingship as *kenosis*, and my articulation of the insight as such here, I am indebted to Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D.C. Schindler (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 86-87.

²⁷¹ Bieringer, “‘My Kingship is Not of this World’ (Jn 18,36), 160-161, 166-175.

life for his followers. ...By doing so, John does not deny the political dimension of Jesus' mission, but rather corrects widespread first-century political practice by going back to the biblical theme of the shepherd. Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. He is the Messiah-King promised by God in the prophetic tradition."²⁷²

He continues to be so as African Christians proclaim him, as the bringer of societal revamp in the way they imagine. He is a king by his kenotic act, which is exercised in his self-giving for all, and in turn set forth as an example for Christians to follow. Energized by Christ's own life and together with him, Christians may promote the reign of justice, peace and integral wellbeing in African society.

4.2. Testimony of the Early Christians

Reference to the earliest Christians' experience and understanding of Jesus, and for the purpose of my evaluation of the of the grassroots Christologies, could be situated and clarified within the context the discussion about the possibility and limits of what is generally called "religious experience." The question of its legitimacy and role has continued to acquire more and more urgency in the christological dialogue of recent years. Religious experience is appreciated as a dynamic hermeneutical locus for the knowledge and transmission of the christological assertions on the identity and work of Jesus Christ, particularly within "ecclesial faith community," early and later.²⁷³

We recognise that there are wide "varieties of religious experience" that make the notion quite ambiguous and complex, and to be treated with so much skepticism. For Ezigbo, "the skepticism of people regarding most religious experiences can be explored from phenomenological, psychological, and theological spectrums."²⁷⁴ However, he maintains that religious experience cannot be ignored in any serious interpretation and evaluation of the christological confessions.²⁷⁵ This is important all the more given the intrinsic connection between the biblical testimony about Jesus Christ, the experience of the Church in the earliest centuries and the experience of the Church's tradition. Ezigbo cites Ronald Nash, a twentieth century Reformed theologian and apologetics, who argues that, "the revealed texts are products of the religious experiences of the inspired human authors who penned them."²⁷⁶ In this connection also, the American Jesuit theologian Roger Haight, underscores that "the first genetic source for the scriptures...lies in religious

²⁷² Ibid., 175.

²⁷³ See Atansi, "The Centrality of Ecclesial Faith Community," in "Significance of Scripture in Christology," 53-54.

²⁷⁴ Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 114. Ezigbo explains why many people find it difficult to take religious experience seriously. According to him, "in psychology, it is difficult to know if an acclaimed religious experience is a hallucinatory experience or an experience that occurs as a result of mental disorder. For some anthropologists and sociologists, the phenomenon of religious experience poses a conundrum because it is not always clear if a given experience is a historical fact; that is, if it happened, and is authentic, original, and verifiable. Some theologians discard religious experience because they consider the cognitive input or interpretation of a given religious experience a threat to some already established traditions, especially if the interpretation suggests some new innovations."

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 115.

²⁷⁶ Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 143, as cited in Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 115.

experience.”²⁷⁷ Larry Hurtado has also argued, as referred to by Ezigbo that, “revelatory experiences were crucial contributing factors in producing the important religious innovations that mark earliest Christianity.” As such, the role of religious experience on how Christians understand the identity and work of Jesus Christ is not peculiar to African Christians.

With respect to the grassroots christological confessions, Ezigbo highlights and discusses “three types of religious experiences” that exist in African Christianity and could account for their Christological imaginations. They are: (1) “Conversion religious experience” which is believed to be the prompting and action of the Holy Spirit in the interior of a person who experiences the reality and need of Jesus Christ as his or her healer, liberator and king. (2) “Revelatory religious experience” which take different forms like, dreams, vision, and deep intuition. (3) Relational or existential religious experience describes as the “continuous communication or interaction between a Christian and Jesus,” with whom many Christians claim to be in a living personal relationship and experience as the healer, liberator, and guide of their lives.

In this connection, and in the light of what has been said before about the enduring place of religious experience in the christological testimony of scripture and tradition, we might say, in fact, that the African grassroots Christological imagination of Jesus as healer, liberator and king is a given faith and hope experience that emerges from within the matrix of preaching, prayer and worship. The communal life of faith and liturgical worship in many African Churches provide the genuine Christological living space for having and accounting for the experience and confession of Christ in the images described against the criticism that such experiences are overtly subjective. In mutual faith, in praying, celebrating, suffering and living together, the Church becomes a community for the African Christians where faith in Jesus Christ confessed as healer, liberator and king can be experienced and appropriated as a force that sustains them in their daily lives and in the crises of their social existence. That is only one side of the assertion, however.

The English New Testament scholar and historian of the early Church, Nicholas Thomas Wright, and other New Testament authors, observe that the gospels also oriented in a basic way how the early Christian communities experienced and understood Jesus. So that the christological images that one finds in the gospels, according to N.T. Wright, reveal something also of how the early communities understood and interpreted the significance of Jesus’ life and mission.²⁷⁸ The underlying discovery, Wright convincingly argues, is that the early Christian communities appropriated them as means or referents to their relationship with a living reality; a reality whose agency acted upon theirs, such that they were empowered to live out this experience in their exercise of actions on behalf of others.²⁷⁹ This was the case that they came to be “called Christians” (Ac 11:20-26). This is

²⁷⁷ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 94, as cited in Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 115.

²⁷⁸ See N.T. Wright, “Imagining the Kingdom: Mission and Theology in Early Christianity,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 4 (2012): 379-401, at 398-401. See also N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992).

²⁷⁹ See N.T. Wright, “Jesus’ Self-Understanding,” in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47-61.

how Wright fills out the idea, citing from the book *Evangelism in the Early Church* by Michael Green:

“The life and ethics of the Christians... were inspired and ennobled by a new motivating force, which the Christians claimed was none other than the Spirit of God active within their lives. *They made the grace of God credible* by a society of love and mutual care which astonished the pagans and was recognised as something entirely new. It lent persuasiveness to their claim that the New Age has dawned in Christ.”²⁸⁰

Hence, the early Christians, too, in their concerns on the status of Christ acknowledged it in terms of relationship, agency and act. They witnessed to it, as such, in their longing for a transformed created, social order. Could the same understanding be gleaned from the creed’s image of Jesus Christ? I address this question in the next section.

4.3. The Creed’s Image of Christ: Divine and Human

Certain theologians argue that the notion and confession of Christ in African Christianity as healer, liberator and king are “alien to the kinds of christological statements made about Christ by the older, ecumenical formulations.”²⁸¹ Given that these grassroots christological images are inspired by the biblical instances of Jesus’s healing, liberating and victorious life and praxis, and which are not separable from the witness of the Church’s tradition, it follows by an inner necessity that the African grassroots Christologies expressed in these images are ecclesial Christologies. Like the Chalcedonian christological formulations, the grassroots Christologies are the common confessions of the majority of the African Christians in their own effort to witness to the long and living tradition of the Church’s christological proclamation.²⁸²

Hence, as we have already highlighted, the grassroots christological images of Christ as healer, liberator and king are the African expressions of, for instance, the Chalcedonian formulation of the identity of Jesus as “true God and true Man.” Because he is a “problem-solver” or a “miracle worker”, he is involved in the concrete cause and real concerns of the African person; only thus is he affirmed uniquely as “truly God and truly Man.” He is “truly God” who can heal, liberate and lead the human person in its entirety beyond the abilities and limitations of the human person. He is “truly Man” who knows and shares the situation of human beings, especially of people that are always in dire need of healing, liberation and leadership. As the “Son of Man,” understood and expressed in the christological images of healer, liberator and king, Christ is one who comes to the African as “a personal presence

²⁸⁰ N.T. Wright, “The Historical Practice of the Mission of God,” in “The Early Christians and the Mission of God,” December 9, 2019, Oxford, <https://ntwrightpage.com/2020/03/30/the-early-christians-and-the-mission-of-god-the-michael-green-memorial-lecture/> [accessed April 26, 2020]. Italics in the original, emphasis mine.

²⁸¹ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 120.

²⁸² For an extensive discussion of this basic insight, see, for example, Uchenna Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor: An African Contextual Christology in the Light of the Major Dogmatic Christological Definitions of the Church from the Council of Nicaea (325) to Chalcedon (451)* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003). See also Godwin Akper, “The Person of Jesus Christ in Contemporary African Christological Discourse,” *Religion & Theology* 14 (2007): 224-243.

(Emmanuel), not as one who imposes himself from outside, but as one who takes up into himself what is deepest and truest in all human experience and transforms that into fullness of human life as the second Adam, the new human being.”²⁸³

The above insights are all the more significant when one considers that the “early Church Christology is not an abstract theory.”²⁸⁴ The creedal formulations concerning the identity and work of Christ were also “driven by existential requirements and motivated by the question of salvation.”²⁸⁵ This idea is in line with my earlier finding that the creedal formulations of the council of Chalcedon are contextual, even though they could also be regarded as “grounding for other contextual Christologies, like the grassroots Christologies in African Christianity.”²⁸⁶ That being so, it could be said that, the grassroots Christologies, in their characteristic fashion, affirm the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ as “a valid and permanently binding interpretation of Scripture,” and of faith in Jesus Christ.²⁸⁷ The grassroots Christologies are a modest and pious attempt to uphold what Ian McFarland, in his recent book on “the theology of the incarnation,” describes as “Chalcedonianism without reserve.”²⁸⁸ Furthermore, the grassroots Christologies attest to the generative and communal ways African Christians experience Jesus Christ and express their hope in him.²⁸⁹

To acknowledge these facts as a way of giving credence to the theological significance of the grassroots Christologies is not enough for disclosing their socially transformative potential. Doing so demands a closer and a more critical look at the Chalcedonian claim that Jesus is fully God and fully human. As Walter Kasper brilliantly explains: “the christological dogma of the Council of Chalcedonian constitutes, in the language and in the context of the problem at the time, an extremely precise version of what according to the New Testament (the testimony of early Christian community) we encounter in Jesus’ history,” what we see and understand about his life and mission.²⁹⁰ The dogma points to the entire existence, history and fate of Jesus Christ, and to “the inner constitution of the divine and human subject.”²⁹¹ This constitution can be understood in terms of the abiding relationship between the Eternal Word and the Word made flesh.²⁹² More to the point, one must consider also “the whole range of relationships between God and creatures...and the highly distinctive relationship between God and humanity found in

²⁸³ Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 684. See also, Stinton, “Jesus–Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God,” 6–40.

²⁸⁴ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, xiii.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii, 218. Kasper writes that, “the dogma of the Council of Chalcedon was formulated wholly in accordance with the intellectual and political assumptions of the situation at that time.”

²⁸⁶ Atansi, “Experiencing Christology: Donald Gelpi’s Interpretation of the Chalcedonian Christological Formula,” 67–71.

²⁸⁷ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 226.

²⁸⁸ Ian A. McFarland, “Introduction: A Chalcedonianism without Reserve,” in *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 1–15.

²⁸⁹ For a discussion of “how Africans have experienced Jesus,” see Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 670–683.

²⁹⁰ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 225–226.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁹² *Ibid.* See also McFarland, “‘One and the Same’” in *The Word Made Flesh*, 71–98.

Christ.”²⁹³ The relationship between Jesus and the Father flows into and establishes the relationship amongst creatures, and is made manifest in the works of love. Jon Sobrino, whose historical Christology I shall discuss in greater detail in chapter 3, has also shown from his analysis of the conciliar formulae, that they present the single, total reality of Christ in the light of (1) his relationship with God and with human beings, (2) the exercise of his ongoing agency, and (3) his acting in the place or role of God and on behalf of humanity.²⁹⁴ This is why we speak of the threefold christological notions: relationship, agency and act. In this way, any understanding of Jesus’ identity must have to take into account, and never lose sight of these three items. It is also from within this understanding that the consideration of the socially transformative potential of christological belief could be sustained.

4.4. Jesus Christ: Relationship, Agency, and Act

What I have tried to do above in (re-)connecting the grassroots Christologies to the *loci christologici*, is to articulate the essential aspects of the narratives about the identity and work of Jesus Christ, whether as healer, liberator or king. The analyses above show that Jesus’ identity and work, as presented in the gospels, as testified to in the life of the early Christian community, “the community that can be described as Jesus’ spiritual progeny,” to use Rowan Williams’ words, and as implied in the credal formulation, touches on the christological notions of relationship, agency and act. On this basis, we may conclude that the figure of Christ, the transformation he was seen and understood as bringing about, unfolded – and still unfolds – within the context of (1) Jesus’ relationship to his Father and others, (2) the empowerment his own agency and for the empowerment of the agency of others, and (3) the actions which establishes the relationships and are manifestations of an empowered agency. Therefore, relationship, agency and act are the three main christological themes for clarifying the single, undivided reality of Jesus Christ – regardless of the choice of image by which he is proclaimed or presented. It is along the lines of these themes that we are enabled to clarify the connection between christological belief and social transformation in a more systematic theologically and practically adequate manner, without doing violence to the biblical, ecclesial, or credal standards.

To be sure, these themes are not laid out systematically as such in these christological sources. However, they represent the convergent ideas that could be extrapolated from a

²⁹³ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 5. The same idea is discussed at some length by Gerald O’Collins. According to O’Collins, in the light of a favourite phrase, “the ontology of the incarnation,” the unique event and identity of the second person of the Trinity inaugurates and confronts us with “a radical relationship between human beings and God,... a unique relationship of love between the uncreated and created: divinity and humanity in a personal union.” Gerald O’Collins, “The Incarnation: The Critical Issues,” in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, 1-27, at 1, 6.

²⁹⁴ See Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 1, and his detailed discussion of the “Conciliar Christology” in Part III of the book, 221-330. The idea is well established in the nineteenth chapter titled “Formal and Doxological Readings of Chalcedon: Following Jesus as an Epistemological Principle.” See also Sarah Coakley, “What Does Chalcedon Solve and What Does it Not? Some Reflections on the Status and Meaning of the Chalcedonian ‘Definition’,” in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, 143-163.

critical-constructive engagement with the sources, and in the Christian reflection on the meaning and implications of “the Word made flesh.”²⁹⁵ So, one could safely understand the themes to be the background set of presuppositions or simply, the aspects, for characterizing and making sense of Jesus’ life and mission, on the one hand, and for working out more elaborately the theological-practical relation between belief in Jesus and societal transformation, on another hand. I should spell the idea out here, and somewhat, in the next section, very briefly. My aim is only to point to the line of enquiry, the three themes that might help us in the further investigation of how christological belief relate to social transformation, not here yet to nail down precise arguments. I shall offer a more detailed theological and practical inventory of the themes in the third and fourth chapter.

According to the testimony of the Scripture (the prime accessible site of God’s self-revelation), the witness of faith and hope of the early Christian communities (the contemporaries of earthly Jesus), and the basic form of the christological profession of faith (the creed’s image of Christ), Jesus’s healings, his liberating praxis, his active commitment to the Reign of God, all point to the fact that the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ unfold from within the context of (1) his constant relationship with the Father and with others, (2) his ongoing agency, and (3) his acts of love. Relationship, agency and act, these three form the nucleus around which any understanding and interpretation of Jesus’ identity and work, and their significance for the transformation of society, could crystallize. In this way, when we proclaim Christ, or think about him in whatever manner, whether in relation to the transformation of society in Africa, the case in the present research, we are trying to open our lives to the reality (on the part of Christians who proclaim Christ) or we are attempting to clarify the notions (on the part of the academic theologians) of Christ’s relationship with the Father and other people, his creative and transforming agency, and his actions of solidarity with humanity.

These decisive insights are what the confession and understanding of the images of Christ as believed, lived, proclaimed, and translated in many African Christian Churches miss out on, as we have seen. This omission, very evident in the christological imagination at the grassroots, could explain why the proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ have not been able to contribute to the transformative aspect of Christian faith as we saw already in subsection 3.2. The images are not sufficiently seen as pointing to the enhancement of one’s relationship with Christ and with others, the engagement of the human agency, and as making a praxis oriented demand for commitment to social transformation, and so, the socially transformative potential of the images is not yet fully disclosed nor realised.

5. Towards Disclosing the Potential of the Grassroots Christologies

(Embodying Jesus’ Relationship, Agency, and Act)

The imagination (experience) of Christ and the proclamation of his identity and work in the grassroots Christian communities press on us the question of how we are to *act from* Christ as the animating and transforming power of Christian existence and commitment towards the social order. It is a question of how to explore and disclose the socially

²⁹⁵ See McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh*, 1-15, 213-224.

transformative potential of the christological experience and understanding. As a first response to this question, I would say the potential lies in making more apparent and vividly acknowledging the three notions for understanding the meaning of Christ's life and mission, and the import of the notions in the longing for the transformation he brings. In other words, the potential of the grassroots Christologies consists in appropriating the images of Christ as viable sources for (1) fostering an enhanced *relationship* of Christians with Christ and with one another, (2) engaging Christians' possibility to assume *agency* for their lives and the lives of others, and, therefrom, (3) mobilizing their inherent capacity for the commitment to *practices* that will bring about the transformation of their societies. Put in another way, from the constructive-theological account of Christ's identity and work both in the grassroots Christian communities and in the classical sources, three christological conditions for societal transformation are deduced: Relationship, Agency and Praxis.

Having said that, the insights garnered so far in this chapter allow us to articulate further reasons why grassroots Christologies have socially transformative potential, and to suggest why they should be taken more seriously in the Church's proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ and in the light of the contemporary discourse about her social engagement in the name of Christ. The first and perhaps most obvious reason for considering grassroots Christologies as having a socially transformative significance in contemporary African Christianity is theological. Most importantly, I highlight the fact that they are the most concrete ways the people imagine and express their understanding of who Jesus was and is, and what he did and does.

The second reason which is profoundly social follows from the first. It is the fact that there is a vision of the society which is present and borne in the practices of grassroots christological imagination. In this second instance, grassroots Christologies could safely be considered as the *site* of the intrinsic connection between Christian and social imagination, and which offers an alternative vision of a new African society.²⁹⁶ For instance, Aylward Shorter, drawing on his many years of experience and fieldwork among grassroots Christian communities in Tanzania, maintains that, "the value of communal prayer for the sick is incontestable."²⁹⁷ He rightly underscores that, "it not only heals individuals in the moral and social sphere, but it can and does bring about an inner healing of disturbed people, and it can even assist and accelerate physical healing."²⁹⁸ Shorter demonstrates how such communal prayers, "above all, creates a sense of social responsibility and solidarity."²⁹⁹

This leads to a third and a more practical reason for intuiting that grassroots Christologies could provide the source for realigning the African Christians' consciousness with the commitment to building up a just society for the common good, and so, have a socially transformative potential. On this point, Robert Schreiter remarks that, "the

²⁹⁶ This insight is in line with the central argument of Emmanuel Katongole's book *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination*. According to Katongole, Christian narratives and imagination has the potential to create a transformed future for Africans.

²⁹⁷ Aylward Shorter, "Spirit Possession and Christian Healing in Tanzania," *African Affairs* 79 (1980): 45-53, at 50.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

understanding of who Jesus is mirrors in many ways the challenges that Africa faces today.”³⁰⁰ He cites the example of Christ as healer. According to Schreiter, the image of Christ as healer within the grassroots Christian community has the possibility of directing attention to “the practical needs of community-building and effective medical care.”³⁰¹ In other words, the grassroots Christologies could challenge the status-quo and issue in a reinforced sense of communal responsibility. This is to say, the proclamation of Christ in the grassroots Christian community, a sacramental community as such, can provide, or rather become a proper ground for mission *ad intra* and *ad extra*.

However, in itself an all too easily elaborated consideration of grassroots Christologies as socially transformative may tend to be reductionistic and overly simplistic. Yet while I maintain this line of thinking, it will not be sufficient to simply tease out the socially transformative potential simply because of the reasons I enumerate above. It will be possible to suggest an answer for how these images can provide the source for Christian commitment to social transformation after having explored – in chapter two – how theologians have reflected on these images of Christ, and translated their theological perspectives on them for the work of social transformation in Africa. Filling out the theological and practical lines along which the potential can be distilled will also be possible if we are able to introduce a robust christological scheme that will allow for a critical appropriation of these images. The search for this christological scheme will be part of what I shall pursue in chapter three that enters into critical-creative dialogue with the historical Christology of Latin American theologian, Jon Sobrino.

Consequently, I maintain that the African grassroots Christologies – the experience and proclamation of faith and hope in the ongoing, transforming presence and action of Jesus Christ – have the creative effect of (re)constituting “a Christian community (as a visible social unit) capable of influencing and transforming social situations in Africa.”³⁰² Yet this is never in the way many Christians tend to understand the identity and work of Jesus Christ, who they see as a superhuman. Jesus Christ is not a superhuman; he asks, he depends, he walks and works through human agents like he had been. It is this relatedness with, and directedness towards other lives, and which flows over into actions of solidarity, that brings about a transformed society. To be sure, this understanding does not allow for the imagination of Christ’s identity and the ensuing attitude in which people are excluded or seen as competitors. The christological imagination, properly so done, would always be of a kind that embraces all in the common search for the life, well-being and flourishing of every human person.

³⁰⁰ Schreiter, “Introduction: Jesus Christ in Africa Today,” ix.

³⁰¹ Shorter, “Spirit Possession and Christian Healing in Tanzania,” 53.

³⁰² Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*, 13. Emphasis mine.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have offered a constructive-theological account of how the vast majority of Christians at the grassroots level in African ecclesial-social context appropriate and interpret Christ's identity and work. For this purpose, I first explained why beginning at the grassroots level, where ordinary Christians practice their faith in Jesus Christ in their everyday lives, is crucial in the quest for a Christology that can (re)orient and engage Christians towards the transformation of their society. This was followed by a description of what I mean by grassroots Christologies as the ordinary people's way of seeing and understanding who Jesus is and what he does. Afterwards, I clarified the conceptual framework that helps to shed light on how the experience and expression of Christ among Christians can provide resources for their social engagement. In the light of the framework, I then examined three images of Christ – healer, liberator and king – by which individual Christians and believing communities express their belief and hope in Christ as the bringer of social change.

In my examination of these images, I underlined the fact that they have theological significance. For they are the people's way of expressing who Jesus is to them and what he does for them as "true God and true Man," in their challenging social situations. Along this line, I also observed that images reflect the urgent longing of the people given their social realities: the longing for healing, wholeness, well-being, liberation, life in freedom, abundant life, and social justice – indices of a transformed society. This does not mean that the christological images are just projections of determinate social conditions.³⁰³ If that were the case, Christology becomes just a manner of speaking about such conditions. Or it serves simply to provide the instrument of social transformation – "by way of a utopian vision in the social contexts where religion and faith are still alive and influential."³⁰⁴ This mechanistic approach has been pointed out in my exploration of the grassroots Christologies. That is why in my study above, I also offered a critical assessments of the christological images. In doing so, I sought the transformation of the images themselves from being sources "of an alienating piety into a mobilizing one," as José Bonino rightly remarks in his introduction to the study of christological images in Latin America.³⁰⁵

Hence, by means of a critical-constructive and creative re-reading of the gospels, the witnesses of the early Christians, and the creed's image of Christ, I drew attention to the lines of the socially transformative potential of the images. With the insights garnered from the engagement with these sources, I indicated that the images of Christ as healer, liberator and king in the grassroots Christian communities could and should "generate a new receptivity," and begin to stretch the Christians' capacity for relating to, embodying, and responding in concrete praxis, to the ongoing, transforming presence and act of Christ in their midst. In other words, the christological images provide resources for rethinking, reinterpreting and collaborating with Christ's transforming power in Africa's social sphere.

³⁰³ It is the Latin American theologian, José Míguez Bonino, who cautions against the tendency to interpret the images of Christ solely in such light. See Bonino, "Introduction: Who is Jesus Christ in Latin America Today?," in *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies*, 1-6.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Considering them as such serves to safeguard and reinforce the formulary and creedal image of Christ; and to arrive at an understanding of the basic form of the christological profession of faith, not as fideistic or moralistic datum, but even more deeply and concretely, as a socially transformative datum. In this way, the images offer a vision of the Christian life as a journey and praxis of social transformation.³⁰⁶

The next chapter will present and review the christological reflections of some African theologians about these images. It will investigate how scholars have tried to explore and distill the socially transformative potential of the images. It reviews how they have tried to realign the vibrant christological imagination of African Christian consciousness, particularly at the grassroots, with the efforts to bring about a transformed society in the context. In what ways have theologians themselves appropriated and presented these images of Christ, which are dominant in African Christian landscape, in their own works? In what ways have they tried to interpret and appropriate the images as sources for Christian commitment to social transformation? Have they done so in the light of the threefold christological notions – (1) enhanced personal relationship with Christ and other people, (2) empowered human agency, and (3) embodied practices of solidarity – which are essential for exploring adequately, the relation between christological belief and social transformation? These questions are foremost in my mind in the course of the investigation in the next chapter.

³⁰⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 136, cited in Cook, “A Social-Transformation Image,” in *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 201n2.

CHAPTER TWO

(RE-) IMAGINING CHRIST FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: A CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THREE TRENDS

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I offered a constructive-theological account of the christological imagination of the vast majority of African Christians. I did so by critically examining three images of Christ: that of healer, liberator, and king, which are popular in the grassroots Christian communities, in sub-Saharan Africa. Two main points stand out in this study. The first was on the theological substance or significance of the christological images. Against the view that the grassroots Christologies are simply “rhetoric of God’s empowerment,” forms of enchanted Christianity, or sheer “solution-oriented Christologies,” I argued that they are the visible expressions of ordinary Christians’ inmost experience and understanding of the continued Christ-event in their midst. The images are Christians’ confessions of – as well as faith and hope in – who Christ is and what he can do and does as “true God and true Man,” in their personal lives and challenging social situations. That is to say, these images capture Christians’ way of *relating* to the totality of Christ’s divine and human identity, from within their African life context. For in this context, one must not overlook the continuous longing by its people for health, life together in freedom, and social justice – all of which are preeminent indices of a transformed society, or “pillars of authentic social development,” as described by Pope Francis when narrating the experience of his visits to Africa.¹

I also underlined some theological and practical limits, and the consequences therefrom, of the mode of Christians’ relation to Christ. The manner in which they *relate* to Christ (often as *Deus ex machina*), within the context of their proclamation of him as healer, liberator and king, does not allow for a critical and fuller engagement of their human *agency*, so as to become oriented towards a mode of *action* that can contribute more to social transformation. This is a crucial point to note in any attempt at responding to the question of “what accounts for the dismal social impact” of christological belief in Africa.² It is also an important fact to keep in view in any effort to discover how christological faith

¹ Pope Francis, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings*, Thursday, 9 January 2020. www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/ [accessed January 12, 2020]. In the pointed description of the Pope, “increased security, reducing poverty, improving healthcare systems, favouring development and humanitarian assistance, promoting good governance and civil rights...are the pillars of authentic social development.”

² Many African theologians have continued to grapple with the question as I presented earlier in the “General Introduction” to this research. To mention it again, in the words of Orobator, constantly engaging “this question is certainly of interest for a continent renowned for an explosion of religious growth.” See Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 85. But in most of the responses to the question, many of the scholars have not probed the underlying christological motif and function or malfunction that undergirds the dismal social impact of Christian faith in Africa. That is what I have tried to do in chapter 1 and will carry on later in the third and fourth chapter.

and hope can provide the source (and motivation) for Christian commitment to practices that will have a more transforming social impact in the continent.

There is a second, related but distinct point which received attention in our study in the first chapter. It touches on the social dimension of the popular images of Christ. Through a critical but constructive attention to these images, I observed that such images are indicators of the social realities and the quest for the very basic human needs of the people, as I already mentioned. The images are fostered by the concrete social conditions, and specific life-situations of the church communities, out of which the christological images arise. Thus, they are often employed as means and sources for speaking to the challenging conditions in the context. I therefore maintained that the invocation of the images – as the expression of faith and hope in the abiding presence and transforming act of Jesus Christ – could have the creative effect of (re)constituting “a Christian community (as a visible social unit) capable of influencing and transforming social situations in Africa.”³ For my part, I maintain this end-stage is not yet the case in the scene of events in many dominantly Christian environments in African context.

So, then, in the light of the theological substance (the Christians’ sense of, even though narrow, relations to Christ and his transforming power), and the social dimension (the manifestation of the believers’ longing for well-being, life in freedom, and social justice) of these grassroots christological images, I argued that they have a potential for social transformation. That is, the transformation of societies which would flow from the direct and generative effect of a christological spirituality. The spirituality I propose here: (1) integrates loving personal *relationship* with Christ and with other people, (2) engages the *agency* of African Christians and empowers them to confront their social realities, and (3) enables the Christians to enact embodied *practices* of solidarity as the decisive form of Christian discipleship, within and beyond the ecclesial communities. It is this potential that the present research recognizes in trying to explore how the vibrantly imagined Christologies of African Christian consciousness can animate a lively commitment to transforming society.

Having said that, in this chapter, I present and evaluate the views of some contemporary African theologians on how the (re)imagination of Christ’s identity and work – as healer, liberator and king – can foster a new sense of Christian vocation and responsibility, particularly within the social situation of Africa. Something we have said is discernible and could be pursued, but which has not been fully (critically and constructively) explored in the way these images are proclaimed and employed to function in the grassroots Christian communities. In doing so, the chapter continues the theological and practical (social) analysis of the three popular images of Christ begun in the preceding chapter.

The objectives, then, in this chapter are: first, to find out whether and how African theologians, in their own intellectual quest for a “transformative Christology,” have paid robust, critical-empathetic attention to the socially transformative potential of the christological experience and expressions (carried in those images) at the grassroots level. This is important because paying such attention opens the theologian to the rich reality of

³ Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*, 13. Emphasis mine.

how the African Christians recognize and respond to what God in Christ has done, is doing, and can do in their concrete situations of illness, poverty, suffering, and social injustice. In this way, the theologian is brought closer to the experiences of the Christian community. Also, his or her christological reflections would “not be averse to bearing the social marks of the life of the Christian community as a whole to which the theologian belongs.”⁴ Another importance of this attention will be that the practical consequence of the christological re-imagination for societal transformation in Africa are not to be about individual proposals coming ‘from-on high’ of the theologian’s privileged acumen, but about *everyone* discerning and working together to build a more just and humane society.⁵

The second objective of this chapter follows from the first. It is to critically review the theological reflections of selected contemporary African theologians on the christological images and beliefs in African Christianity. I evaluate how their starting points, their approaches, the sources, methods, and categories they use, the content of their christological reflections – in a word, their insights about these images – have or have not (1) enhanced the African Christians’ personal and communal *relationship with Christ and with other human beings*, (2) allowed for a critical *engagement of the agency* of African Christians, and (3) fostered a more *embodied enactment of Christian practices* that contribute to the transformation of African society. In other words, the chapter seeks to explore how scholars have interpreted the images of Christ (as healer, liberator and king), in order to inspire, inaugurate, and promote a new christological understanding, disposition, and ethic, that can contribute to social transformation across the continent.

In line with, and in addition to, the two objectives described above, there is also an auxiliary objective in this chapter. It is obviously to highlight the intrinsic (osmotic, or what Stinton prefers to consider as “circular”,⁶ but often, unbalanced) relation between grassroots (popular) and constructive (academic) Christologies; and possibly to promote a greater dialogue between them in the quest for a Christology that can transform lives and society in Africa.

Finally, this chapter, more than just being a required part of a scientific work as this, is deeply a part of my “grateful and critical dialogue” with the Christologies of my

⁴ Orobator, “The Sky is Wide Enough,” 37. Within the context of his discussion of “theological activity and method in Africa,” Orobator expresses that in this way (of an empathetic-critical attention to the grassroots experience and expression of Christ’s identity and work) “we are better able to appreciate the importance of repositioning theological (christological) reflection within the context of the community called Church and the wider society.” Consequently, Orobator further remarks, “it becomes clear that it is not enough to theologize exclusively on the basis of the intellectual acumen of the theologian while he or she comfortably ensconces himself or herself in the protected milieu of academia.” This idea follows from Orobator’s conviction that “the work of theologizing (christologizing) must spring from the forthright observation and experience of the situation in the life of believing community wherein echoes the strong wind of the Spirit.” Ibid., 41. I discussed this idea at length in section 1.1 of chapter 1 where I made the case for “beginning at the grassroots” in the search for a transformative Christology.

⁵ Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, “Discerning and Collaborating with Christ’s Solidarity with the World: Oscar Romero’s Christological Spirituality and Its Methodological Dynamism,” Presentation in the context of the interdisciplinary academy *Romero: Memory – Activating Heritage of International Solidarity*, organised at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, 4-8 November, 2019.

⁶ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 251. See also the configuration of African Christologies, which are described with a representation in Figure II-1 in Stinton’s *Jesus of Africa*, 51-52; and idem, “Jesus – Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God: Aspects of Popular Christology in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 6. I have also referred to this idea in my description of grassroots Christologies in chapter one. See pages 27-31.

intellectual forebears. For as O’Collins warmly puts it in the preface to the first edition of his *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, “to write a satisfactory Christology, you must tell a story that is at least partly familiar – to the stories that have been told by one’s predecessors and even contemporaries – and cannot promise to be constantly and startlingly original.”⁷ In saying this, I do not undercut the significant contribution that the present study seeks to make in the debate about the social relevance of christological belief in the African context. It is rather intended to accentuate the fact that the chapter is a way of situating further the research within a broader scholarly (christological) context.⁸

To offer a more schematic and systematic presentation of the ideas of the select African theologians, the discussion will be organized along the three main themes or tasks – (1) inculturation, (2) liberation, and (3) reconstruction – in African Christology, as theology in general. The three themes we have identified are central to what also has been categorized typically as “the trends in (contemporary) African Christology.”⁹ To carry out the discussion under these three trends will enable us to manage the many rich, though at times, intricate and often controversial sources, disparate array of approaches, and diverse views on the subject of African Christology.¹⁰

There are some criteria for choosing the authors I shall discuss under each trend. First, I take note of the relative prominence they assume in the discourse about Christology in Africa, specifically in the reflections about the (theological-social) meaning and significance of the images of Christ as healer, liberator and king in African Christianity. The second criterion is the attention they pay in their christological reflections to the interplay among social context (that is, the concrete, challenging realities of many Africans,

⁷ Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), x.

⁸ I have mapped and described the theological context of the present research in some detail in the General Introduction.

⁹ Orobator writes that, historically, African theology (and this could also be said specifically of African Christology) has been interpreted largely under three major categories. The first is “African theology” also referred to as “theology of adaptation, incarnation, or inculturation,” or simply “*inculturation* theology.” The second category is the so-called “Black theology,” which is also considered as “African *liberation* theology.” The third category which Orobator identifies as “a third force,” that is, “a third major trend in African theological enterprise,” is the “*reconstruction* theology.” See Orobator, “The Sky is Wide Enough,” 36-41. For a summary discussion of the trends, see Charles de Jongh, “Contemporary Trends in Christology in Africa,” *South African Baptist Journal of Theology* (2008): 1-12. See also Raymond Moloney, “African Christology,” *Theological Studies* 48, no. 3 (1987): 505-515. For an exploration of the trends within the context of theology and mission, see Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Trends in African Theology since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Leberit Press, 2005). Oborji offers a summary presentation of these trends within a broader perspective than the missiological in his “Inculturation and African Theology: The Paradoxes of the Paradigm Shifts,” www.foborji.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Inculturation-and-African-Theology-October-2016.pdf [accessed April 29, 2018].

¹⁰ See Christopher Magezi and Jacob Igba, “African Theology and African Christology: Difficulty and Complexity in Contemporary Definitions and Methodological Frameworks,” *HTS Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1-7. An example of this “difficulty and complexity” in African Christology could be seen in Julius Gathogo, “Reconstructive Hermeneutics in African Christology,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 1-8. In the article, Gathogo claims “there are basically six christological approaches.” He eventually identifies seven, and ends up mentioning nine – contextualisation, indigenisation, rebirth, inculturation, renewal, rejuvenation, renaissance, liberation, and reconstruction; but finally, he succeeds in emphasizing and discussing only the three main trends – inculturation, liberation, and reconstruction. For a similar list, see Clifton Clarke, *African Christology: Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity*, 9.

Christians and non-Christians alike, especially at the grassroots level), the christological belief, and the quest for social transformation. The third is the obvious claim that their own christological enterprise, particularly their interpretations of the three images of Christ, and generally, their re-presentations of the Christ-event, are theological responses to the challenges of the complex realities of human existence and living in Africa, and are concerned with the transformation of societies in the context. Let us now begin our examination with the first trend.

1. Inculturating Christ

1.1. Introducing Inculturation Christologies

Inculturation was the foremost concern in the theological agenda and in the earliest christological works of many African theologians in the past half-century.¹¹ It was the most discussed trend, often considered to be at the heart of African Christology. Inculturating the figure and work of Christ acquired more and more urgency, and was seen as crucial in the African theological conversation until the mid-1970s.¹² And it has remained one of the major subject matters in contemporary African Christian theology (Christology, ecclesiology, theological ethics, etc.) even to this day.¹³ The initial and dominant place that inculturation had received in African Christology was mainly because most African theologians were suspicious and overly critical of the old missionary adaptation, which was overriding in Africa during the days of the nineteenth century missionary expansion up to

¹¹ The pertinent ones include: Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984); idem, "African Christologies Today," in *Jesus in African Christianity*, ed. J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, 17-39; and in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert Schreiter, 3-23; idem, "Contemporary African Christologies: Assessment and Practical Suggestions," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 62-77; Bénézet Bujo's "Proto-Ancestral Christology," in his book *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 75-91; Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Jesus Christ: Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives," in *African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology*, ed. J.S. Mbiti (Bossey: World Council of Churches, 1977), 51-65; Chukwudum B. Okolo, "Christ is Black," in *African Christian Spirituality*, ed. Aylward Shorter (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), 68-71; Justin S. Ukpong, "Christology and Inculturation: A New Testament Perspective," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini, 40-61; F. Kabasélé, J. Doré and R. Luneau, eds., *Chemins de la Christologie Africaine* (Paris: Desclée, 1986); John Pobee, ed., *Exploring Afro-Christology* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992); Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 75-88; Moloney, "African Christology," 506-513; Cosmas Okechukwu Ebebe, "Who Do You Say I Am? John Mbiti, Ukachukwu Chris Manus, Charles Nyamiti and Bénézet Bujo's Approaches to Christology" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Facultas Theologiae, Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, Rome, 2009).

¹² For an accessible account and a systematic discussion of the evolution and meaning of inculturation, see Shorter, "Inculturation, Its Nature and Function," in *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 3-72. See also Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990).

¹³ See, for example, Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); idem, *What is not Sacred?: African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 186-194; Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, "An African Moral Theology of Inculturation: Methodological Considerations," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 583-609; Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African: Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 151-175; and William R. O'Neill, "African Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001): 122-139.

the Second Vatican Council.¹⁴ In response to that, “Christologies of inculturation,” in their quest for cultural relevance, focused primarily on the struggle for ‘saving’ the African religious-cultural heritage. But they also sought a meeting point of the gospel with African culture, and on how the gospel can be integrated in the African cultural worldview, or “the rooting of Christianity in the African setting,” as John Pobee puts it.¹⁵ Hence, Christian elements in the culture, and cultural elements in Christianity, were appropriated for a re-interpretation and re-presentation of the person and mission of Christ.¹⁶

In this view, the theologians under this trend envisioned their task to be mainly the translation of the Christian expressions of Christ’s identity and work, in terms that resonate with, and are proper to, the African religious-cultural heritage. They were deeply motivated by the desire to inculturate faith in Jesus Christ. The contributors in this movement “aspire to a Christology that is fully African and completely Christian – that is to say, they look for a living Christ for Africans.”¹⁷ In carrying out this task, they began by simply “examining scriptural and christological elements which are then marched [sic] with ‘relevant christological images’ discovered in the African cultural experience.”¹⁸ In doing so, the principal preoccupation of the theologians “revolved around how to *fit* African religious beliefs into constructed Western theological synthesis and categories,” and vice-versa.¹⁹

¹⁴ See Francis Anekwe Oborji, “Inculturation and African Theology: The Paradoxes of the Paradigm Shifts,” *African Ecclesial Review* 43 (2001): 19-28. See also F.A. Oborji, *Trends in African Theology since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation* 2nd edition (Rome: Leberit Press, 2005). For a historical-theological account of “mission and inculturation” see Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 137-176.

¹⁵ See John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 81. Paulinus Odozor considers this as what constitutes the “first sense of inculturation.” Odozor argues that the meaning of inculturation could be articulated further in what he identifies as the “second” and “third” sense. For a discussion of the second and third sense (meaning) of inculturation, see Odozor, “An African Moral Theology of Inculturation: Methodological Considerations,” 584-587.

¹⁶ It is important to note that this process of inculturation (the dialogue between Christianity and African culture) has not always been a very mutual one even till this day. In 2009 during the press conference of presentation of “*Relatio Post Disceptationem*” of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal John Njue of Nairobi, discussing the relation between inculturation of the Christian faith and African traditional religion, underscored the fact that the relation has often been challenged by “fear and uncertainties which characterize the life of faith in many African populations.” Cardinal Njue underlined that, “[t]his fear and uncertainty cause mistrust, self-defence and aggressiveness...or an attempt at syncretism between Christianity and traditional religion.” See Chiara Santomiero, “Africa Faces Challenge of Inculturation (October 2009),” <https://zenit.org/articles/africa-faces-challenge-of-inculturation/> [accessed December 15, 2018]. See also, Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, “The Church in Africa in Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace,” II *Coetus Specialis Pro Africa, Relatio Post Disceptationem*, October 13, 2009, Rome, Italy, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091013_rel-post-disceptationem_en.html [accessed December 15, 2018]. For a systematic-theological and pastoral analysis of the challenge of inculturation from a uniquely African (Igbo) perspective, see Michael Muonwe, *Dialectics of Faith-Culture Integration: Inculturation or Syncretism* (Indiana: Xlibris, 2014); and his essay “Syncretism and Inculturation: Mutually Inclusive or Exclusive Options in Christian Evangelisation?,” in *Syncretism: Failure or Opportunity for Inculturation?*, ed. Henri Derriotte, Wim François and Jacques Scheuer (Leuven: Peeters, 2017): 225-250. See also Edwin Anaegboka Udoe, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts between Christianity and African (Igbo) Traditional Religion through Inculturation* (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2011).

¹⁷ Gerald O’Collins, “Developments in Christology: The Last Fifty Years,” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 90 (2013): 161-171, at 169; idem, “Christology – The Last Fifty Years,” in *Christology: Origins, Developments, Debates* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2015), 12.

¹⁸ Orobator, “The Quest for an African Christ: An Essay on Contemporary African Christology,” 77.

¹⁹ Orobator, “Method and Context,” 121. Emphasis mine.

So, “too often, African Christologists of inculturation were engrossed in the task of painting an African face of Jesus Christ.”²⁰

This approach of inculturation Christology that simply tries to ‘match’, ‘fit’, and/or ‘paint’ an African figure or face of Jesus Christ is also adopted in the works of many African theologians who try to present an African “face” of the Church, and subsequently, her social mission.²¹ Against this backdrop, Stan Chu Ilo’s description of the efforts of the theologians of inculturation – Christologists and ecclesiologists alike – and the inherent dynamic of their inculturationist approach is upheld in what follows. This is how Ilo explains it: they “pursued the translation model of contextual theology...and were concerned with orthodoxy and the integrity of the gospel message and its appropriation in its pure form in Africa.”²² We shall be returning later in subsection 1.4 of this chapter to some of these critical remarks on the procedure and eventual outcome therefrom, of the African theologians who have been active in “inculturating Christology” as their way of responding to the many social issues affecting people and the practice of faith in Africa.

For the moment, it suffices to mention here one major shortcoming of the inculturation approaches to Christology, especially as regards their outcome in the context of the search for the social relevance of christological belief in Africa. It is this: no sustained attention is paid to how the images of Christ, particularly at the grassroots level, relate to the specific and concrete social issues of concern to the African person, and how the prophetic potential in these vibrant christological images can be harnessed in order to enhance Christians’ relationship with Christ, to empower their agency, and to motivate Christians to take up practices that will bring about the transformation of their societies. As the discussion in this chapter will further reveal, this shortcoming is due to the approach which was and remains largely theoretical and speculative, or in the words of Orobator, an approach that is facile and descriptive, lacking analytical and theological depth and weight.²³ This, according to Orobator, makes their “work hardly distinguishable from that of cultural anthropologists, sociologists and ethnologists.”²⁴ As such, their art or act of inculturating Christ’s identity and work relies “mainly on the intellectual imagination of the individual theologian.”²⁵ This initial and general remarks find ample illustration in the texts of many African Christologists, as we shall see.

In response to this shortcoming, let us emphasize here once again a guiding thesis that belongs to the core of the present research, and which we drew out in the previous

²⁰ Orobator, “The Quest for an African Christ,” 97.

²¹ See Orobator’s excellent critique of such moves in his article, “Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology,” *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996): 267-281, especially at 279-280. See also his *From Crisis to Kairos*, 74. According to Orobator, “[a] critical reading of the major texts of African ecclesiology reveals the shared presupposition of African theologians that the elaboration of a valid African ecclesiology depends on the retrieval of African traditional cultural concepts and values. These are then *correlated* with received notions of the church (derived mostly from ecclesiastical statements and documents) in a theological process known as “inculturation.” From this process emerges an ecclesiological concept with an African colour or flavour.” Emphasis mine. I will speak more to this idea later.

²² Stan Chu Ilo, “Transforming Africa through Charity in Truth: A Creative Appropriation of the Social Gospel,” in his *The Church and Development in Africa: Aid and Development from the Perspective of Catholic Social Ethics* 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 214.

²³ Orobator, “Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology,” 279.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 10. Emphasis mine.

chapter. Christological enterprise, particularly in Africa, is not and should not be merely a matter of an individual theologian attempting to present or re-present the identity and work of Jesus Christ. The life and worship of the people of God is always an important formative and transformative factor in christological imagination and re-imagination. In this way, christological knowing, believing, and acting ought to be received from and shared with others in an inclusive, non-solitary and non-divisive way. For it is a communal engagement and a social embodiment of the identity and work of Christ within and outside of a believing community. In this way, it (Christology) offers a vision of and for social life, a vision of what counts as a truly transformed society that manifests the densely “radical quality” of Christ’s transforming presence and power.²⁶

In view of the limited purpose of this section and the two that will follow in the totality of our investigation, it is not possible to canvas the work of all the theologians who qualify for inclusion in this first trend in African Christology. I will limit myself to two representative thinkers, namely, Aylward Shorter (b.1932) and Ukachukwu Chris Manus (b.1950). A word of explanation about this choice is in order. Shorter, though himself British, is a member of the Missionaries of Africa and a pioneering cultural and religious anthropologist of Catholic mission. He is one of the most leading thinkers globally in the effort to understand the principles of inculturation and how to appropriate them in the work of Christian evangelization, human promotion, and social transformation in Africa. Shorter’s foremost attempt in this regard focuses on the identity and work of Christ as Healer – one of the three popular images in African Christianity that I examined in the previous chapter.

Manus is a Nigerian theologian who has offered, to my mind, the most consistent and systematic theological treatment of the second popular christological image – Christ as King – in African Christology (and Christianity). He received his Ph.D. in systematic theology from the Catholic University of Louvain (KU Leuven), Belgium. He is currently a professor of New Testament studies and African Christian Theology at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Manus wrote his *Christ, the African King*, one of the major contributions in “constructive Christologies of contemporary African Christianity,” as a Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Bonn, Germany. He is, moreover, a regular contributor in many academic sources, drawing on insights from the re-imagination of Christ as “the African King.”

Thus, Shorter and Manus will serve as perhaps the best, iconic representatives of the inculturation approach, though we shall refer to other scholars of inculturation Christologies as the discussion proceeds. For thematic and structural purposes, the following discussion will be carried out along the lines of the presupposition, the method, the sources, and the outcome of their study of these images. These amount to what could be considered their own christological reflections and responses on the issues of social transformation in Africa.

²⁶ See subsection 2.3 in chapter 1. It sheds light on the “socio-theological” performance and significance of christological imagination and images in the African Christianity. We shall pursue further these ideas, and, in view of working out their systematic-theological and practical implications, especially in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

1.2. Aylward Shorter: Christ the Diviner-Healer

Aylward Shorter's christological approach to the issue of social transformation in Africa is based on a presupposition about the strong link between "Christology and inculturation."²⁷ To Shorter, "the subject-matter of inculturation is Jesus Christ himself."²⁸ Therefore, the goal of inculturation is to enable Christians and theologians to always speak meaningfully and practically of the person of Christ and the salvation (transformation) he brought.²⁹ It is in the light of Christ and the Christ-event, Shorter reflects, that Africans are able to understand inculturation, and to also engage in the "conscious process" of inculturating Christ (Christology) as an authentic path to societal transformation.³⁰

This high premium that is placed on Christology and inculturation vis-à-vis social transformation is not only evident in the works of Shorter. There are other notable theologians who spoke and still speak of the connection among Christology, inculturation, and social change. For example, Robert Schreiter, in a recent work, observed that, "if any single area of theology is especially poised to raise questions about the nature, the practice, and the socially transformative goal of inculturation, it is Christology."³¹ This is much the same view in the works of earlier African inculturation Christologists whose works Shorter also draws on in his own book. The Benin Republican theologian, Efoé-Julien Pénoukou, is cited by Shorter to have remarked that, "inculturation is the only serious problem of the African Church," and in that wise, African society.³² Congolese Christologist, Bénézet Bujo, also observed that: "A truly dynamic – engaging and transformative – Christianity will only be possible in Africa when the foundation of the Africa's whole life is built on *Jesus Christ, conceived in specifically African categories.*"³³

Shorter follows this line of thinking in his own interpretation of the figure and mission of Christ. The idea is brought to the fore in one of his major works on the interpretation of God's self-revelation, its meaning and implication in the African context.³⁴ In the work, Shorter contends that the building of a just society in Africa depends on the appropriation of God's self-revelation (the incarnation of Jesus Christ) in the light of the socio-cultural symbols and systems of the African person.³⁵ Adapting and re-presenting Christ in the socio-cultural and traditional religious framework and categories of Africans, Shorter thinks, will help to disclose the socially transformative potential of Christian belief in

²⁷ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (1988), 75-88. See also Aylward Shorter, *Evangelisation and Culture* (New York, NY: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994); idem, *Christianity and the African Imagination: After the African Synod, Resources for Inculturation* (1996).

²⁸ Shorter, Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 59-63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75, 89-103.

³⁰ Shorter, "The Relevance of Inculturation for Development," in *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 241-244

³¹ Robert J. Schreiter, "Foreword," in Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), xi. Bracket mine. See also Robert Schreiter, Review of *A Handbook on Inculturation*, by Peter Schineller, *The Journal of Religion* 71, no. 2 (1991): 313.

³² Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 78.

³³ Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 91. Italics and bracket mine.

³⁴ See Aylward Shorter, "Adaptation, Inculturation, Interculturation," in *Revelation and Its Interpretation, Introducing Catholic Theology 1* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 246-250.

³⁵ Shorter, "Evangelisation, Integral Development and Social Justice," in *Revelation and Its Interpretation*, 250-251.

Africa. That is why, for him, the practice of inculturating Christ's identity and work, specifically as healer, is the most viable way of fulfilling the longing for human flourishing, of realizing the quest for abundant life, and of meeting the personal and social needs of Africans, Christians and non-Christians alike.³⁶ Hence, he privileges the image of "divine-healer" for the task of re-imagining and appropriating Christ in Africa, and for articulating the socially transformative significance of who Christ is as the portrait of God's presence and action on the continent.³⁷

Shorter is so convinced about such christological understandings and intellectual moves. He justifies his divine-healer Christology, and his whole approach to it, on the basis of his many years of encounter, living, and researching among the grassroots people in a number of African countries.³⁸ And he renders a very particular account of some of his experiences in many parts of Africa. He mentions, for instance, that he has had "the opportunity over the years of studying very closely the fortunes of a Tanzanian spirit medium and traditional healer."³⁹ This had afforded him the many insights about the identity and work of Christ, which he might not otherwise have had.⁴⁰ He also narrates his own personal experiences of and encounters with situations of unimaginable brokenness, painful ailments and disability suffered by many people in Africa, which give rise to the longing for integral healing and well-being. Consequently, in his christological reflections and pastoral writings, Shorter continues to maintain that the practice of inculturating Christ is best achieved in the re-presentation of Christ as Healer.⁴¹

Shorter upholds this view even in the "foreword" to a recent book on his divine-healer Christology, *Christ Our Healer: A Theological Dialogue with Aylward Shorter*.⁴² He writes in the following words: "As a social anthropologist and missiologist working in Africa, it was inevitable that questions of health and healing should attract my attention, since these are such an important part of African human experience."⁴³ He goes even further: "My own missionary experience convinces me more and more that the African experience of evil, suffering and sickness can only be made meaningful by reference to a strong faith in the power of Jesus Christ as healer."⁴⁴ It is understandable that in his presentations about the

³⁶ Aylward Shorter, "Foreword," in Fernando Domingues, *Christ Our Healer: A Theological Dialogue with Aylward Shorter* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 9.

³⁷ Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

³⁸ Shorter is described as having spent more than thirty-five years of his missionary and academic life and work in Africa, and have visited over half of the continent's countries. See Shorter, *Christianity and the African Imagination*. In the "preface" to his seminal work on "inculturating Christ" he also writes that, "[f]or more than twenty years I have been conducting anthropological research, doing pastoral work as a Catholic missionary, writing and teaching in universities and places of higher education in the three countries of East Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. I know these countries well and I have also made short visits in the course of my work to some twenty other African countries." Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness*, x.

³⁹ Shorter, "Foreword," in Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid. See also his depictive account in "The Migawo: Peripheral Spirit Possession and Christian Prejudice," *Anthropos* 65 (1970): 110-126; idem, "Spirit Possession and Christian Healing in Tanzania," 45-48.

⁴¹ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, ix-x, 3-6.

⁴² Aylward Shorter, "Foreword," in Fernando Domingues, *Christ Our Healer: A Theological Dialogue with Aylward Shorter*, 7-9.

⁴³ Shorter, "Foreword," in Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

life, mission, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he never ceases to make the case for Christ as healer.⁴⁵ This is because the image of Christ as healer speaks to the deepest experience of “the scandal and scope of sickness,” and the longing for healing in Africa.⁴⁶ The image does so in such a way that resonates with the African religious-cultural and socio-political consciousness. Therefore,

“The Christology of Christ Our Healer is a work of extreme importance in so far as it strengthens faith conviction, and meets the personal needs of African Christians. It is a teaching that must be made widely known in the Church. ...Centred on the person of Christ, nothing could be more fitting and more realistic than the celebration in Africa of Christ as Our Healer.”⁴⁷

Certain questions, nevertheless, remain: What does his image of Christ the divine-healer suggest about the Christian vision of societal transformation in Africa? What are the social implications Shorter draws from his re-imagination of Christ as diviner-healer? In other words, is Shorter able to relate convincingly the image of Christ the healer to the African social realities, which he claims to inform his christological re-imagination of Christ as diviner-healer? How does Shorter flesh out his insights about Christ as the divine-healer, particularly, in a way that could help to foster the African Christians’ relationship with Christ and with other human persons, to engage the agency of African Christians, and to motivate them to adopt conscious voluntary social actions based on such “inculturated” christological image of Christ that he proposes? Can his insights still be appropriated for an enhanced Christian social engagement in today’s Africa? Questions such as these bring us to discuss the process, method, and sources that prevail in Shorter’s effort to re-interpret the identity and work of Christ as divine-healer in relation to the quest for social transformation in Africa.

Shorter begins his christological reflections by drawing on the work of the second century Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, who is regarded as the foremost exponent of the Divine Word, the Logos, in early patristic Christology. Shorter refers mainly to Justin’s conception of the seed-bearing Logos.⁴⁸ The idea of the seed-bearing Logos is that, the divine Word, the Eternal Logos, has always been present and active within the concrete situations of a people. So that, in paying attention to the people’s social contexts and realities, the divine Logos is encountered, and his transformative work made manifest. Shorter works with this framework, yet prefers to invert it in his own christological enterprise. He moves from the African social situation to the incarnate Word, rather than from the incarnate Word to the concrete social situation. There are certain methodological and theological consequences of such a transposition, even though each dimension mutually implies the other. I will say more about the consequences later. Shorter rather prefers to begin with the sympathetic attention to the social situations and realities. For him, such an attention is what evokes faith in Jesus Christ, makes the faith meaningful and alive,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7. See also Shorter, “Folk Christianity and Functional Christology,” 136.

⁴⁶ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 7-19; 32-43.

⁴⁷ Shorter, “Foreword,” in Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 9.

⁴⁸ Shorter, “The Eternal Logos at the Heart of Culture,” in *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 75-79.

and enables actions (on the basis of the faith) that can bring about the transformation of the social realities for the well-being of Africans.

Shorter claims that it is this Logos Christology that enables him better to construct the theological foundation of inculturating Christ, and subsequently, to engage in the specific process of inculturating Christ viewed as the divine-healer. And he considers this process to be “the second form of functional Christology.”⁴⁹ According to him, this functional – and not the ontological – orientation is the most proper form of effective christological reasoning and application within the African context.⁵⁰ For it is commonly upheld that in Africa, formal doctrinal and dogmatic concerns seem to matter less than practical and functional beliefs.⁵¹

Even, more importantly, the functional Christology is what allows for a greater emphasis on the transformative presence and action of Christ. Furthermore, this functional Christology, Shorter suggests, bears views of Christ and of faith in him, which motivates practical dispositions African Christians need in order to become more involved in the work of societal transformation. The functional christological understanding is what leads Shorter, then, to affirm that, “the more inductive method is preferable” for the purpose of speaking about Christ and his work of salvation in the African context.⁵²

The inductive method, according to Shorter, respects “the internal frame of reference of the African consciousness and the intense African desire for healing and wholeness.”⁵³ The method makes it more feasible to work out a contextualized theology of Christ as healer, and therefrom, to offer a Christian evaluation of African approaches to the various levels of holistic (personal and social) healing.⁵⁴ Shorter’s method is commendable for a number of reasons. On the whole, it is precisely his active method that helps him to always keep in view the two viable points of reference – the African religious-cultural consciousness and the longing for a good and flourishing life – in his entire christological venture, aimed at speaking from within and to individual Africans at the grassroots level. It is also a method by which he immerses himself within the community of believers and is acquainted with their worldviews. By so doing, Shorter offers his own first-person perspective about the conditions and complexities of life and belief in this context. This approach in turn enables him as an individual researcher to better understand the meaning and function of Christ in that context, and to imagine more creatively a theology of Christ – the Diviner-Healer African Christology – which he believes will resonate with the experiences of a people who long for and look to Christ as their healer.⁵⁵

The most prominent consideration for Shorter’s diviner-healer Christology is “the tradition of integral healing associated with the African medicine-man.”⁵⁶ The purpose of

⁴⁹ Shorter, “Folk Christianity and Functional Christology,” 136.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. For a similar train of reasoning, see also Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 86; and Clifton Clarke, “Towards a Functional Christology among African Indigenous Churches in Ghana,” *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 22 (2005): 287-318.

⁵² Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 75.

⁵³ Shorter, “Christian Healing in Tanzania,” 53.

⁵⁴ See Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 119-236.

⁵⁵ Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 106.

⁵⁶ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 3.

choosing this tradition, and of the figure in particular, according to Shorter, is to be able to provide a more robust “Christian reinterpretation of this much maligned figure.”⁵⁷ While this effort to re-present the African traditional diviner-healer in the light of Christ’s identity and mission, and vice versa, is appreciated, the tone and style illustrate one of the points I mentioned earlier on what is often the primary, though very limited, goal of inculturation. It is the fact that Shorter’s endeavour seems to be again just about saving and protecting African religious-cultural heritage from Christian missionary detraction. Even though, Shorter tries to go beyond that, to also think of how to translate the identity and work of Christ in a more constructively indigenous way. But his preferred christological title for the translation seems to undercut his effort. The title for him is “the witchdoctor” or “diviner being,” what is recognised by the people in terms like *nganga*.⁵⁸ Shorter contends that the image of Christ as *nganga* is widely used in African social, theological and Christian landscapes.⁵⁹

For instance, an important figure in African research, the Dutch missionary, Matthew Schoffeleers observes that, “it can easily be shown that – at the level of folk theology – there exists at least one christological paradigm which is made use of over large areas of sub-Saharan Africa.”⁶⁰ Schoffeleers comments (Shorter himself speaks as much) that, for instance, “in the catechesis and liturgy of African churches, Christ is often referred to as the one true *nganga* because this is an image that the audience intuitively understands.”⁶¹ On the significance of *nganga*, Schoffeleers explains that, “because it is an essential part of folk theology, the *nganga* provides a framework within which to conceptualize the person of Christ and the role of the Christian minister.”⁶² Likewise, “Christ and the Christian minister provide a framework within which the *nganga* is constantly being reconceptualized.”⁶³ This dialectic of the *nganga* paradigm as such, according to Schoffeleers bears a transformative significance. He, however, acknowledges, that professional theologians have not sufficiently explored the “functional potentialities,” of the *nganga* paradigm, which is so tangibly and extensively present in folk Christology.⁶⁴

Following the same train of thought, Shorter, on his part, maintains that the image of *nganga* is used to refer to diviner-doctors in traditional societies.⁶⁵ The usage in the religious-cultural, and his own adoption of it for inculturating Christ’s identity and work is the most authentic way of responding to what he considers as an urgent question and concern which is, “how far the role of the so-called witchdoctor helps us to understand

⁵⁷ Ibid., 3, 7-19.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

⁵⁹ Ibid. For another detailed theological analysis of the image of Christ, the diviner-healer as “nganga”, see Matthew Schoffeleers, “Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the *Nganga* Paradigm,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19 (1989):157-183; and as “Christ in African Folk Theology: The *Nganga* Paradigm, in *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression*, ed. Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E.A. van Beek and Dennis L. Thomson (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: James Currey Ltd., 1994), 72-89. See also, Cécé Kolié, “Jesus as Healer?,” in Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 128-150.

⁶⁰ Schoffeleers, “Christ in African Folk Theology,” 74.

⁶¹ Ibid., 79.

⁶² Schoffeleers, “Folk Christology in Africa,” 172.

⁶³ Ibid., 172-173.

⁶⁴ Schoffeleers, “Christ in African Folk Theology,” 87.

⁶⁵ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 8.

Jesus himself as a healer,”⁶⁶ and subsequently, in the quest for health and wellbeing in Africa. Shorter then remarks that,

“Christians in the Third World must go back to the despised witchdoctor (a West African translation for “Healer”) to find answers to many of the questions being asked today about healing and to see how compatible they may be with the teaching and witness of Christ.”⁶⁷

The outcome of this “going back to the despised witchdoctor” is that in Shorter’s Christology, Jesus Christ is simply *likened* to the traditional diviner-doctors. The image of the “traditional doctor,” and his sacred therapeutic role in the life of an individual and of a community, are upheld by Shorter as the standpoint from which to look at Christ as the one who brings God’s definitive and redemptive healing and restoration to humanity.⁶⁸ In Christ the divine-healer, Shorter maintains, God draws near to the world of suffering, of sickness and pain, to assume them and to transform them through a share in his own transformation.⁶⁹

Presented in this way, Christ’s identity and scope of activity as *nganga* is understood to be quite encompassing, embracing every reality that affects an individual or a community. This all-embracing character of the healer is made possible due to the fact that the *nganga* is thought as possessing “a mysterious knowledge about the conditions of people he healed.”⁷⁰ Likewise, Jesus as a diviner-healer does not only restore people to wholeness, but also *reveals* the cause of their brokenness and the path to their healing and restoration. The revelatory character of his healing power is seen in his complete fore-knowledge of a person’s condition.⁷¹ That is why in Shorter’s diviner-healer African Christology, according to Domingues’ interpretation, emphasis is placed on the value of Christ-event as an event of *universal revelation and salvation*.⁷² Domingues appreciates further this aspect of Shorter’s Christology and its significance in these words:

“[F]rom its own traditional roots, it [Shorter’s Christology] has something to offer to the whole Church: an enrichment in the understanding of the Mystery of Christ as the Divine Healer who, in and through his ecclesial communities offers God’s *integral* healing, which reaches *the person* not just in his inner spiritual life, but in the globality of his life, with particular relevance to her relationships at the social, spiritual and cosmic level.”⁷³

Domingues remarks are helpful for us to see why Shorter places emphasis on the event of the Paschal mystery. For as Shorter himself argues, “emphasis must be shifted from Incarnation to Paschal Mystery.”⁷⁴ The paschal mystery is, for him, what is at the

⁶⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 15-16. See also, Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 65.

⁶⁹ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 41.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 106. Emphasis in the original.

⁷³ Ibid., 107. Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁴ Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 83.

heart of the functional Christology, and which is more appropriate in engaging a people for whom the greatest question and concern is what Christ can do in their midst “rather than the mystery of his own personal identity.”⁷⁵ From this perspective in which Jesus’ relevance is prioritized over his identity, Shorter claims he is more able to present how the event of Christ’s life and mission is a universal and universalizing one, how the Christ-event can be discerned and re-presented in every culture and religious tradition of humanity.⁷⁶ Even though, in my view, the downplay of a robust representation of Christ’s identity and mission in the light of his incarnation – which is our main access to the unique and universal event of divine self-revelation – would inevitably lead into some kind christological utilitarianism and ethical reductionism. I shall return to this critical remark later.

In the name of accentuating the Christ’s paschal mystery in his divine-healer Christology, Shorter privileges “the actions (miracles, healings, exorcisms) of Christ... than [his] words and teachings”⁷⁷ Jesus’ healing action was always viewed as a means of manifesting the Kingdom or Reign of God.⁷⁸ Like the traditional diviner-healers, Jesus “used the techniques of popular healers and exorcists, and to that extent, at least, he was like a traditional diviner-healer or witchdoctor.”⁷⁹ Shorter maintains that “Jesus also shared the integrated approach to healing.”⁸⁰

“In his [Jesus’] own life he offered a comprehensive redemption from the world’s sickness, and in his own person he offered a release for the sick, the sinful, the sad, the aliens, the outcasts, the poor and the ritually unclean. In Jesus’ message there was no condition of diminished humankind, no sickness, disability or guilt which was impervious to the liberating and restorative power of God’s love encountered in his own life and person.”⁸¹

Thus, Jesus’ approach is similar to what one finds amongst the traditional healers, even though in his healing activities he goes beyond the diviner-doctors.⁸² This is a claim that one would expect in most works of many Christologists and theologians of inculturation concerned with a re-presentation of the identity and work of Christ within the religious and cultural context in question, and in terms of the dominant categories and frameworks in the context.

The social consequence or the practical import of Shorter’s christological reflections about the healing identity and work of Christ as *nganga* is a natural development of the above reflections.⁸³ So, he simply makes a leap from Christ to the Christians. Shorter turns to the life of Christians, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church, in order to establish how Christ’s identity and work as healer is translated, and how it could be fostered for meeting the challenges of sickness and brokenness in the continent. He starts to offer a moral exhortation. According to him, the Christian believer is called to be a wounded healer

⁷⁵ Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 106.

⁷⁶ Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 83-87; idem, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 187-199.

⁷⁷ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 11-12. Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 106.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 12, 175-186.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁸¹ Ibid., 13, 187-199.

⁸² Domingues, *Christ Our Healer*, 107.

⁸³ Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, 200-236.

like Christ, who is both “wounded healer” and “victim”.⁸⁴ After that, he turns to the sacramental sources in order to analyse how the various sacraments of the Church, especially the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and of Penance, are the sources of “Christ’s healing presence” and mission.⁸⁵ He then goes on to draw out the implications of his “diviner-healer and healing Christology” by discussing the healing gifts of the Church and her members. He writes:

“We are all of us healers...called to participate in the healing ministry of Christ, to heal ourselves and others. With Christ we are healers and that means that we are wounded healers like him. After the Resurrection Christ showed the wounds in his hands and his side to the apostles. It was a proof of the continuity of his identity, but it was also a sign that he had drawn victory and glory from those wounds. For us, too, God is able to draw good out of evil and glory from our wounds, even the wounds that are self-inflicted.”⁸⁶

There is, clearly, much truth in these considerations. They point to Shorter’s effort to show how the doctrine of Christ as “God with us” (the healer *per excellence*) could make sense to the African person, whose deepest longing is “healing and wholeness.” In addition to that, Shorter intention to lay out how such interpretation could help to trace something of the illumination that connects christological belief with social transformation in Africa. But the task of connecting Christ to social transformation in Africa involves more than simply pointing to or making ample, positive remarks on the relation between inculturating Christ and social transformation. The task demands working out the relation more elaborately, and at a very systematically theological, and practically communal, levels. Shorter himself recognizes the latter, but quite lately at the end of his book *Toward A Theology of Inculturation*, where he discusses the theme of “inculturation at the grassroots,” and as “a community project.”⁸⁷

In the final analysis, Shorter’s christological reflections on the identity and work of Christ as healer, and its socio-theological implications, come out as a sort of “mimetic representation,” and sometimes as informed moralistic appeals about the healing power of Christ’s and the Christians’ life and commitment. On the whole, Shorter’s christological reflections offer some consoling worldview that one may hold on to in the experience of sickness and longing for wellbeing by many Africans. What is more, it is also obvious that Shorter’s christological study of the image of Christ as “diviner-doctor” (healer) aims to confront the language and tradition of the faith with the images, culture, and traditions of Africans. In this way of inculturating Christ, he privileges the second approach of inculturation that tries “to make Jesus Christ feel at home within the framework of the ordinary experience of African Christians.”⁸⁸ By ordinary he means the religious-cultural categories of Africans. As Shorter himself captures it, the image of Christ as healer “links

⁸⁴ Ibid., 213-236.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 210.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 236.

⁸⁷ Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 261-271.

⁸⁸ Orobator, “The Quest for an African Christ,” 81.

up, not only with vitalistic themes of African religious tradition, but also with the realities of rural community-building” and societal transformation.⁸⁹

Commenting on the strength and limits of Shorter’s presentation of Christ as healer, Raymond Moloney says that, “it is an important datum for presenting Christianity to Africans in particular, since for them this (healing) has been one of the central concerns of religion from time immemorial.”⁹⁰ Moloney then rightly underlines, Christ as healer “implies not only an image for preaching but a particular praxis as well.”⁹¹ A perspective that is not sufficiently worked out in Shorter’s christological project. At best, Shorter’s re-imagination of the image of Christ as divine healer (*nganga*) only “provides a framework within which to *conceptualize* the person of Christ and the role of the Christian minister.”⁹²

There is another limitation, and a critical one at that, in Shorter’s effort to re-imagine the identity of Christ with an authentically African face. Shorter does not lay out adequately how the image of Christ as healer (or the diviner-doctor in his work) implies not just an image for ‘saving’ or upholding African culture, but a concrete image in which grace and demand, faith and love take definite shape as embodied practices of social transformation.⁹³ That is to say, how the image of Christ, the diviner-healer, implies and motivates a particular praxis that conduces to the integral well-being of the African person, Christian and non-Christian alike.

Therefore, the point of understanding or simply re-presenting “Jesus as a healer” in a category that is “compatible” with the African concept of the “diviner-doctors” is only one aspect in the crucial discourse about how Christology should be done in a continent where millions of her children seek not just to understand, but to *experience* Jesus Christ as, truly, *the* healer of their many curable sicknesses and diseases. And on the basis of this experience, become themselves agents of Christ’s healing presence and act in others’ lives and on their society at large. Let us examine the work of another inculturation Christologist, whose focus is on the image of Christ as king.

1.3. Ukachukwu Chris Manus: Christ the African King

Nigerian theologian Ukachukwu Chris Manus is outstanding for his detailed exploration of the image of Christ as King. In his book *Christ, the African King: New Testament Christology* (1993), Manus sets forth the task of inculturating Christ’s identity and work in light of the image of king.⁹⁴ His central argument in the book, and in his other related sources, is that “to inculturate Christianity and to make it live in African images and symbols, our festivals, our literature, our poetry and drama, our music and everyday rituals and worship; we need, among others, a *King-Christology*.”⁹⁵ For Manus, this is a significant

⁸⁹ Shorter, “Folk Christianity and Functional Christology,” 136.

⁹⁰ Moloney, “African Christology,” 508.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 509.

⁹² Schoffeleers, “Christ in African Folk Theology,” 85.

⁹³ Moloney, “African Christology,” 509.

⁹⁴ Chris Ukachukwu Manus, *Christ, the African King: New Testament Christology*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 82 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 1993).

⁹⁵ Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 25. Emphasis in the original. See also Chris Ukachukwu Manus, “King-Christology: The Example of the *Aladura* Churches in Nigeria,” *Africana Marburgensia* 24 (1991): 28-46;

christological task to pursue in the quest for the transformation of African societies. Manus is so convinced of this task that even in a later work on *Intercultural Hermeneutics* he remarks:

“It has become urgent to develop a Social-Action Christology – that is, a Christology that is politically nuanced and one that responds to the expectations of the African electorate. Such a Christology has, of course, to be based on the historical reliability of the biblical account of Jesus. This is, to me, the task, among others, of *Intercultural Hermeneutics*.”⁹⁶

So, much as Aylward Shorter, Manus sets out – in his own words – “to elaborate a Christology faithful to Jesus and the gospel witness; rooted in African history and culture and made relevant to the experience of contemporary African Christians.”⁹⁷ He asserts that his King-Christology “arises from the historical image of Jesus in the New Testament and its portrayal in the light of the protective roles, benevolent rulership and lordship typical of kings in the African communities.”⁹⁸ Therefore, it is rooted both in the biblical pericope and (for) the African context.⁹⁹

And further like Shorter, who in his approach, begins from the African religious-cultural resource in the re-imagination of Christ’s personality and mission as Healer, Manus also begins by identifying and describing the traditional images of African kings, and, afterwards, applies these images and symbols to Christ. In fact, Manus puts it pointedly: “Since African Christian theology is rooted in the experience, history and culture of all African peoples...the cultural matrix of Africa is made my starting point.”¹⁰⁰

In the earliest chapters of his book, in which he develops his King-Christology, Manus presents a wide-ranging sketch of data condensed “from the massive mine of anthropological literature dealing on the religious significance of African sacred kingship traditions in precolonial societies when separation between politics and religion was yet unknown.”¹⁰¹ After that, he provides what he considers “a thorough exegesis of New Testament stories about Jesus of Nazareth, his teaching on the Kingdom of God in the Gospels and the Pauline epistles, his Kingship and the salvific role he fulfils as the Messiah-King of the earliest Christian communities, the *Ekklesia*.”¹⁰² These expositions on the

“Jesu Kristi Oba: A Christology of ‘Christ the King’ among the Indigenous Christian Churches in Yorubaland, Nigeria,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991): 311-330; idem, “King-Christology: Reflections on the Figure of the *Endzeit* Discourse Material (Mt 25, 31-46) in the African Context,” *Acta Theologica* 11 (1991): 19-41, and “King-Christology: The Result of a Critical Book of Matt. 28:16-20 as an Example of Contextual Exegesis in Africa,” *Scriptura* 39 (1991): 25-42.

⁹⁶ Chris Ukachukwu Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), 6.

⁹⁷ Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 20. See also Chris Ukachukwu Manus, “African Christologies: The Centre-Piece of African Christian Theology,” *Zeitschrift Fur Missionwissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 82 (1998): 3-23.

⁹⁸ Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 32-33.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 20, 71-117. One of such works which Manus draws from, which I cited in chapter one (see footnote reference no. 251), is by Basil Davidson, *African Kingdoms* (New York, NY: Time-Life Books, 1966). Emmanuel Asante, *Toward an African Christian Theology of the Kingdom of God: The Kingship of Onyame* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen University Press, 1995).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 20, 118-213.

image of Christ as King within the traditional Africa and the New Testament milieu are, then, followed by a juxtaposition of his findings in the light of the two worldviews, in the concluding part of his work. In the final part, he discusses the implications of his insights for the transformation of African societies.¹⁰³ Referring to Charles Nyamiti, Manus terms this his christological approach “the thematic approach.” He goes on to describe his efforts in this way:

“It [the approach] is thematic in so far as King-Christology...is elaborated from specific symbolic themes or categories taken from African royal institutions; that is, from the African material culture, language, religious traditions, philosophical beliefs and everyday activities and functions of the kings in society. Related ideas, facts of history, royal insignia and paraphernalia and the positive elements intrinsic to the African traditional kingship systems and the New Testament constitute the burden of the analysis and interpretations made towards the emergence of a King-Christology.”¹⁰⁴

I have presented the approach of Manus in some detail because I wish to show that the christological efforts of many inculturationist theologians follow almost similar trajectory. In doing so, I wish also to highlight something of the value and of disvalue in their adoption of this approach in the quest for social transformation. The approach comes simply to something one can safely refer to as christological adaptionism. I shall say more about this later in section 1.4 in which I offer some critical evaluation and remarks about the inculturationist approach. For now, let me stay on the value of Manus’ christological approach in relation to the issue of transforming lives and society in Africa.

Commenting on the value of the approach, Raymond Moloney notes that “it lies in providing the preacher with some traditional concepts and terms in which to express the significance of Christ for us.”¹⁰⁵ Also “it helps to bring into synthesis with our image of Christ some Christian values.”¹⁰⁶ Moloney then points out the weakness in the use of this approach. According to Moloney, and rightly so, the weakness of the approach lies in its use of the traditional categories which many contemporary Christians in their historical context and living experience do not relate to. Kenneth Ross on his part points to similar problem in the inculturationist approach. For Ross, “an important question, however, is how closely this scholarly approach is related to the experience of Christians at the grassroots.”¹⁰⁷ Ross refers to Cécé Kolié as one scholar who has also questioned the motives and procedure of theologians active in inculturation christological enterprise.¹⁰⁸ For Ross (as for Kolié and Moloney) individual and communal believers “relate to Christ personally.”¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the attribution to Christ of traditional titles, or the appropriation of Christ’s identity and work in light of traditional categories, might run the risk of simply being an imposition of the theologians’ way of seeing and understanding Christ. To these

¹⁰³ Ibid., 214-252.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰⁵ Moloney, “African Christology,” 507.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth Ross, “Current Christological Trends in Northern Malawi,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27 (1997): 160-176, at 160.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Kolié, “Jesus as Healer?” 141.

authors – Ross, Kolié and Moloney – who are critical of the approaches of Manus and the likes, the discussions of the inculturation Christologists can make little headway until a clearer picture of ‘grassroots’ Christologies, i.e. of how ordinary people understand the identity and meaning of Jesus Christ, is had.¹¹⁰ And until the grassroots christological imagination is more critically appropriated and integrated within the constructive Christologies of academic theologians.

I cannot at this point make a decisive assessment of Manus’s King-Christology simply based on the approach he favours, and in light of the critique of his thematic approach, as presented above. It could be that even with this approach, Manus still realizes the proposed goal, which is the development of a Christology of social transformation in and for the African context. So, let me now turn to a presentation of the content of his King-Christology. But let me quickly note that for the want of space, I will omit a detailed systematic discussion of Manus’s ideas in line with the structure of his work that I described above. Rather, I will focus on delineating the main ideas of his King-Christology and, especially, how he reflects on its significance for providing the resources and motivation for Christian social engagement in Africa.

Throughout the four moments in his christological undertaking, Manus’s contention is that, first, the image of Christ as king resonates with the African person’s experience and understanding of himself and herself as “a person in community-with others, with kings and with all the forces the sovereigns represented.”¹¹¹ Second, the king image as offered in the bible is in line with strong regal traditions and kingship systems around which most African communities and Africa’s “principal social institutions” were organized and functioned; and which has endured till today in many parts of Africa in spite of the Western systems of governance. Third, the African image of Jesus as king, according to him, is faithful to and is a further elaboration of “the New Testament witness of Jesus, the Messiah King, and entire the biblical message in light of the Kingdom of God and the Kingship of Christ, his role and functions in the Reign of God for Church and society.”¹¹² Therefore, from the outset of his work, he avers:

“[W]hen Christ is presented to Africans as the King, the sum total of all representative African kings; that is as the *Obakarenko*, there will have emerged a Christology derived from an Africa-wide culture and expressed in a category which evokes the experience of the ordinary man and woman to adoration and loyalty. Such a category would make it much simpler for our Christians to understand why Christ, his teaching and his Church should be worshipped, listened to and obeyed. This is because he is King for them. These and other reasons...underscore my choice and disposition to promote a King-Christology from and for the African context.”¹¹³

The conclusion that Manus arrives at in his exploration of the image of Christ as king is flawed and unsettling in my opinion, for the following reasons. First, it is obvious he relies entirely on the African religious-cultural matrix for his articulation of the meaning

¹¹⁰ See, for instance, Ross, “Current Christological Trends,” 160.

¹¹¹ Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 17.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

and significance of Christ as King. He adopts the (conceptual) image of *Obakarenko* which he coins from the traditional titles of four kings in pre-colonial African kingdoms – the Oba of Yoruba (Nigeria), the Kabaka of Baganda (Uganda), the Reth of Shilluk (South Sudan), and the Nkosi of Zulu (South Africa). Manus draws on the rites of the selection, installation, and coronation, and the rulership of the kings in these kingdoms to arrive at his conclusion that the image of Christ as King in the exemplar of *Obakarenko* will evoke “the experience of the ordinary man and woman to adoration and loyalty.”¹¹⁴ Such a christological category, he claims, “would make it much simpler for Christians to understand why Christ, his teaching and his Church should be worshipped, listened to and obeyed.”¹¹⁵

There is a certain analytical imprecision in the presentation of the kingly character and role of *Obakarenko* and Jesus Christ, and within the context of Manus’s King-Christology. This imprecision tends to undermine the strength and soundness of his Christology. He begins with his *Obakarenko* concept, or “acronym”, as he prefers to describe the christological referent. But once he introduces the idea of “Christ-King,” the concept of *Obakarenko* recedes and drops completely out of the picture. As a result, one is at loss whether his King-Christology draws from the identity and role of *Obakarenko* or Jesus Christ. For similar reasons, one perceives such ambiguity in many inculturationist attempts.¹¹⁶

Apart from the indeterminate analytical moves taken, upon closer examination, particularly in light of Manus’s discussion of the king image in the New Testament, one discovers a certain fundamental inconsistency in the character of *Obakarenko* and Christ the King. The character that his christological re-imagination privileges is one of power and hierarchical authority rather than relationality characteristic of the Incarnation and of Christ’s self-understanding in the light of his relationship with his *Abba*-Father. Hence, Manus talks about the fact that the category of *Obakarenko* would move Christians to understand why Christ, his teaching, and his Church should be worshipped, listened to and obeyed.¹¹⁷ For Manus, the worship of, attentiveness and obedience to the king by Christians are demanded simply because Christ the *Obakarenko* is King *for* them. This is very unsettling if what the image of Christ as (African) King motivates Christians to do is simply to worship him, listen to and obey him. This is all the more disconcerting since Manus attributes this quality of *Obakarenko* to the Church and its hierarchical leadership. Does this not bespeak something of the dominance, control and subjugation which Africans have continued to experience in the hands of many her religious and political leaders – modern day “*Obakarenkos*”, who demand nothing but the people’s loyalty and subservience?

Manus tries to make up for this lacuna, however, later in his comparisons of the African religious-cultural (*Obakarenko*) and the New Testament biblical traditions (Jesus the Christ) on the nature and role of the king *par excellence*. From his comparison, he maintains strongly that any authentic understanding and appropriation of the image of

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 25. Bracket mine.

¹¹⁶ Orobator shares a similar impression from his critical engagement with the inculturationist interpretations of the meaning and function of the church in Africa’s social context. See Orobator, “What Are they Saying about the Church? – Approaches in African Theology,” in *From Crisis to Kairos*, 74-85.

¹¹⁷ See Manus, “General Conclusions: King-Christology, Implications,” in *Christ, the African King*, 239-252.

Christ as “the African King” must take seriously the shining examples in the “nature of Jesus’s Kingship,” as offered in the four canonical Gospels. This is because, as Manus comments and commends, “the kingship of Jesus is never exactly like any of the earthly African kingships.”¹¹⁸ Jesus is the quintessence of an ideal King for the African person in the exercise of kingly roles. “Christ, the King is a meek, humble, quiet and simple Servant of God who ministers to the poor; delivers the afflicted and goes about as the messenger of salvation.”¹¹⁹ More so, Jesus’s “humiliation does not detract from his messianic roles.” And, as two South African biblical scholars comment:

“The fact that Jesus’s kingship is rejected, does not imply that his kingship is not real and true. The important thing is that in this way Jesus embodies the pattern of a king who is rejected by his own people, a ruler who is truly a servant, the first who becomes the last.”¹²⁰

These qualities are distinctive with respect to the kingship of Jesus Christ. For he does not act in his own interest, nor exercise his kingly role only from the privileged position of power and might. His kingly character endures and is manifest even in his seeming powerlessness unlike in the case of the African kings (*Obakarenko*). Thus, by proclaiming Jesus as “the African King,” the African Christian leader or Church hierarchy participates in and is invited to witness to Jesus’ reign of humility, justice and peace.

But these words resound like the simple exhortation that we hear in Shorter’s re-imagining of Christ as the diviner-healer. An exhortation that does not pay sufficient attention to the practical and socially transformative potential in these images as experienced and expressed by the Christians at the grassroots. Manus’s Christology like Shorter’s only succeeds in making extravagant claims for the transformation of African societies. The exhortations are always speaking about and speaking to the Church leadership or hierarchy in the search for social transformation. The Nigerian theologian, Francis Anekwe Oborji, argues that such exhortations, which are often directed to the Church hierarchy, are, wittingly or unwittingly, “the very ideologies whose top-down structure perpetuates patterns of alienation and dependency.”¹²¹ And in such a manner, they obscure and miss out on the need to exemplify how the images of Christ – whether as healer, liberator or king – can engage and motivate agents to adopt conscious voluntary practices on the basis of such christological convictions. Oborji is convinced that “the search for alternative history, another society, another humanity, another style of living together takes place at the grassroots in communities of faith and in the ordinary realities of everyday life.”¹²² So that the challenge is to re-present such images of Christ as part of the “everydayness”, the “ordinariness” of every human and Christian life and living, which this project seeks to pursue.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 233.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 234.

¹²⁰ Bernard Combrink and B. Müller, “The Gospel of Matthew in an African Context – In Dialogue with Chris Manus,” *Scriptura* 39 (1991): 43-51. This essay was written in response to Manus’s, “King-Christology: The Result of a Critical Book of Matt. 28: 16-20 as an Example of Contextual Exegesis in Africa,” in the same volume. See as cited in footnote reference no. 95, *supra*.

¹²¹ Oborji, “Inculturation and African Theology,” 15.

¹²² Ibid.

In the final moment of Manus's christological exploration, in the concluding part of his work, he offers three implications of his King Christology that is based on the image of Christ, as the African King. These are the "ecclesial implications", the "liturgical implications," and "the social political implications." I will briefly discuss the first and third of these implications of his King-Christology.¹²³ On the ecclesial implications of his King-Christology, Manus avers:

"My King-Christology does not represent an authoritarian and triumphalistic imaging of Christ which manufactures religious symbols favoured and acceptable to those who wield ruthless power in the Church...or to those who would absolutize the structures in the church to the detriment of the *Ecclesia* as *communio*."¹²⁴

Finally, on the socio-political implication of his King-Christology, he underlines that, "one of the distinctive findings arising from the study of the Kingship of Christ is God's will that man and woman everywhere should attain the fullness of life."¹²⁵ He goes on to say that the reign of God "means nothing if not seen in the works Jesus performed for the physical and spiritual salvation of people."¹²⁶ He then takes on again the typical moralizations that one reads in the theological works that attempt to inculturate Christ in light of the living conditions of many Africans and the political situation of many African societies. Here is Manus's moral pronouncement at length:

"Jesus is King for the African Christians who live their lives under oppression, poverty, hunger and even political exploitation by local overlords and domestic rulers who flaunt the principles of democracy every day in their rulership and with "yes-men" wallow in the midstream of corruption and affluence in the midst of teeming poverty-stricken [sic] peasants. Jesus' whole life and work and his royalty speak to the leaders of African and Third World peoples. His lifestyle as King shows the need for the emergence of a society where mutual service even unto death is the crown of leadership. The gospel of the Christ-King, therefore, invites African leaders to recognize the need to institute multi-party democratic forms of governance in which the full participation of people in government serves "as means of liberating their creativity and industry." They are called upon to combine selflessness and efficiency in the spirit of service in order "to work for the happiness, the freedom and the prosperity of all their children citizens without any distinction."¹²⁷

It is still all about what the leaders who are called upon to imitate Christ's kingship will be and do *for* the people. Even though in the last lines of his discussion on the social implications of his King-Christology, he turns to what the kingship of Christ implies for the African Christians themselves. But even at that, his reflections come across as a theologian's proposal, not so much to the Christians and their agency as to the agency of the elites.

¹²³ The second implication, that is, the liturgical significance of his King Christology, receives a more sustained presentation in his article, "The Liberating Power of the Eucharist," *African Ecclesial Review* 42 (2000): 217-226.

¹²⁴ Manus, *Christ, the African King*, 240.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

1.4. Evaluating African Inculturationist Attempts

In this section, I have examined the christological reflections of two prominent inculturation Christologists – Aylward Shorter and Ukachukwu Chris Manus – on the images of Christ as healer and king, respectively. I have done so with a critical attention on the procedure (presupposition, sources, method) and the outcome (thematic tone, content) of their christological endeavour. I have also paid specific attention to whether in their christological thinking, they were able to explore sufficiently, or able to draw out the connections of their insights to, the subject of the socially transformative potential of these popular images, particular as expressed and as expressed by Christians at the grassroots level. There is no doubt that in their inculturation christological effort, Shorter and Manus refer to Christ in the images that are common amongst the ordinary people. But the issue remains to what extent their christological efforts meet some of the objectives outlined above. And with these objectives in mind, the following critical remarks seem *apropos*.

The first is on the sources they refer to, and the method or approach they adopt in their christological thinking about these images. However much they differ on the details, many African Christologists agree on the need to inculturate Christ in Africa. This involves adopting African religious-cultural “ideas, concepts, images, beliefs and practices to serve as media for *translating* orthodox understanding” of the identity and work of Christ, so that Christ will become rooted in the African land and soul.¹²⁸ So, the main sources from which the images of Christ are retrieved and re-presented are the African traditional religious and cultural ideas and practices vis-à-vis the biblical notions of Christ which they consider compatible with the former.¹²⁹

Consequently, it is not difficult to see also that the standard method and approach employed in accessing these sources as described is the method of translation and/or correlation, or what John Parratt calls “adaptionist approach”.¹³⁰ With this method of translation, correlation or adaptation, Shorter and Manus tend simply to incorporate African religious-cultural categories, traditional thought forms and beliefs in the Christian (often biblical) presentation of Christ. They often appeal to the African traditional religion in order to interpret the identity and work of Christ. They believe that by doing so, Christ is made more at home within the African religious mental and material space, and which in turn will meet the Africans’ need and longing for healing, abundant life, and social justice.

Obviously, the christological method that simply incorporates and/or appeals to the African traditional religious and cultural, does not allow for a deeper, critical-empathetic attention to the historical reality and social situation of Christians who proclaim Christ in certain images. These Christians believe and hope that by such proclamations or invocations, their social condition will be transformed. Apart from this sociological downside, there is also, very importantly, the theological and ecclesiological consequences of their method. The hermeneutical procedure in their use of the method of translation,

¹²⁸ Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*, 83.

¹²⁹ Orobator, “Method and Context,” 121.

¹³⁰ See Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*, 83. John Parratt, “The Theological Method,” in *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 39-40.

correlation or adaptation, tends to focus less, wittingly or unwittingly, on the radically, single reality of Jesus Christ; on the profound meaning and implications of his life and work, which transcend, and, at the same time, are for, every culture and age. This is how the Nigerian Dominican theologian, Anthony Akinwale, also captures the problematic, with particular mention of Manus. Though Akinwale's remarks can be fitting for other inculturation Christologists as well. He writes:

“Manus proposes a hermeneutical procedure to be used outside ecclesial horizon. It's like the Church, the primary recipient of the word of God, has nothing to say as to how it is to be interpreted. One can therefore see how a hermeneutical procedure that bypasses the Church produces a Christology that is silent on the faith of the Church.”¹³¹

I will spell out further in the next remark, the import of this christological lacuna in the works of inculturation Christologists.

It is laudable that their christological re-imagination draws quite heavily upon “familiar images and symbolism” in the African traditional religious and cultural milieu vis-à-vis the biblical portrayal of the way of being and acting characteristic of Christ as healer and king. There is no doubt that these are potentially relevant to the positive growth of Christianity in Africa. But by placing primary focus on simply listening to culture (as does Shorter) or adapting the Christian message (as does Ukachukwu), in order to re-interpret the identity of Christ, the dynamic potential for social transformation in these images is completely forgotten. This is to say, the practical orientation of these images is also undermined.

As I noted in the introduction to this section, it is obvious that these scholars searched for a living Christ *for* Africans and in their longing for social transformation. Their effort based on the principle of “*for* Africans” points to a serious lacuna in their christological project. An approach such as that, as I have shown in this section, will only lead to the presentation of a ‘Christ’ that is extraneous to the African Christian experience *today*.¹³² The Christ that the African Christians believe and hope in, as I discussed in chapter one, is one that they personally and communally relate to from within their own social situation, in spite of the limitation in the mode of this relation. It cannot be the Christ that is the product of a theologian's individualistic mining of cultural categories, some of which are outdated. Moreover, the people of my generation are not really at home with the African traditional religion and cultural categories. So, (re)presenting Christ as *nganga* or *Obakarenko* may not appeal so much to their religious or Christian consciousness, talk less

¹³¹ Anthony Akinwale, “African Theology and Dogmatic Responsibility for the Christian God,” in *God, Bible, and African Traditional Religion*, Acts of SIST International Missiology Symposium, ed. Bede Ukwuije (Enugu: Spiritan International School of Theology, 2010), 212-246, at 241.

¹³² I have argued elsewhere that inculturation, in my view, is a second order event, and as such, it neither bears nor fully expresses or embodies the experience of Christ-event in the everyday (African) context. Anthony Atansi, “The African Experience of Christ: Mysticism and the Christological Imagination in Contemporary African Christianity” (unpublished paper presented at the International Conference on Medieval Mystical Theology in Dialogue with Contemporary Thought, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium, 30 May - 2 June, 2018); idem, “African Christic Experience: Incarnation or Inculturation?” (unpublished paper presented at the Interest Group Seminar on African Theology: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, Leuven, 2017-2018).

of motivating them to take on practices for social change. This is not to say Christ cannot be proclaimed in a people's particular vernacular – that is not the point. The point is rather to maintain that we need a more dynamic appropriation of Christ in terms that are as modern as they are ancient. By this, the *terms* cannot just be about employing a people's dialect. The appropriation of Christ as the image of social transformation goes beyond that. Hence, the christological notions of relationship, agency and praxis for interpreting Christ, and for connecting him to the urgent longing for societal change in Africa as elsewhere, will be more helpful and illuminating.

These remarks make it clear that our christological enterprise cannot stop at simply “attempting to recast Christology using indigenous African forms and categories.”¹³³ It must go beyond what Michael Cook rightly refers to as “mimetic representation” which seem to be the dominant approach in the works of Christologists of inculturation on Christ's identity and work as healer and king, as we have seen.¹³⁴ For as Moloney puts it, “Christologies of inculturation...are largely an exercise in hermeneutics, which sometimes seem an irrelevancy in relation to the enormous political and social problems of African Christians.”¹³⁵ And in the words of the Congolese theologian, Bénézet Bujo, they are “a pompous irrelevance, truly an ideological superstructure at the service of the bourgeoisie.”¹³⁶

Have the Christologists of liberation and of reconstruction which we will consider fared any better in the way they have reflected on the popular images of Christ that are dominant (at the grassroots) in African Christianity? Have they in their own christological proposals paid empathetic-critical attention to the socially transformative potential of these images, and so, outline the process of concrete appropriation and application of the images in the lives of Christians who trust and hope in Christ as their healer, liberator, and king? We shall come to terms with such questions as we continue our review and evaluation of the two trends and the works of some of the representative theologians of liberation and reconstruction that will, in turn, form the subject of the next two sections.

2. Liberating Christ

2.1. Introducing Liberation Christologies

The quest for liberation has shaped and continues to shape not only the liberation thinkers of Latin America but also the pioneers of African Christology. Let me very briefly draw on the insights of three pioneer African theologians in order to show how liberation has been a major concern in recent and contemporary African Christian theology. Charles Nyamiti (1931-2020) is one of the foremost scholars of African Christology. Though a vibrant pioneer of inculturated African theology, he argues that given the socioeconomic and political situation in Africa, the theme of liberation should be at the heart of African christologizing and the locus for theological conversation. Liberation, according to him, “is

¹³³ Ross, “Current Christological Trends,” 160.

¹³⁴ Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 13.

¹³⁵ Moloney, “African Christology,” 512-513.

¹³⁶ Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 71.

not confined to modern socioeconomic and political levels but includes emancipation from other forms of oppression such as disease, poverty, hunger, ignorance, and the subjugation of women.”¹³⁷ Bénézet Bujo’s explicit assertion throws more light on the theme of liberation in African theology (Christology). He writes: “I am not speaking of some socio-political liberation to be achieved through revolution, but of liberation in all its aspects, personal as well as social. People should enjoy fullness of life at every level.”¹³⁸

Laurenti Magesa is another pioneer African theologian, who also underscores that the presentation and proclamation of “Jesus Christ as Liberator” in the present conditions of Africa is the core of any authentic investigation of the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ Himself and His mission, and of any genuine “Christology and ecclesiology of social betterment (transformation).”¹³⁹ Magesa echoes the words of Pope Paul VI, and a representative group of the bishops of Africa and Madagascar, when he writes that the proclamation of and commitment to Jesus Christ as Liberator is “what the Church, the visible body or sacrament of Christ is required to project in Africa through its solidarity with all the temporal forces of genuine freedom.”¹⁴⁰ To drive home this idea, he offers a painful description of the African situation and “the experience of the general mass of the African peoples,” which continues to make the theme of and longing for liberation a central one in African Christology. So, for him, the pursuit of a “liberating Christology” is an urgent task, arising from the widespread social unrest and personal anguish.

“[T]he questions of excessive wealth in the midst of dehumanizing poverty; questions of exploitation of the majority of African peoples by internal and external forces; questions of political domination by domestic and international power brokers; questions of suppression of the African cultures by dominant conceptions of life by means of refutation and ridicule; questions of monopolies of power by ecclesiastical oligarchies at the expense of the liberty of the people of God; questions of instrumentalization and exploitation of the life of the African person. ... And from the problems of ignorance and preventable disease, of famine and ethnic wars, of class antagonisms and racial persecutions, which are the direct consequence of ignoring this basic question of ‘unfreedom’, and of not confronting it in time with the active, liberating word of God.”¹⁴¹

In light of these questions and problems, and the ensuing struggle for and “hope of a transformed Africa, an Africa filled with abundant life for all,” for life in freedom and integral well-being, Magesa writes that the consideration or the “attempt to present Jesus Christ as Liberator can be, and in fact is, the only comprehensible and credible image among Africans.”¹⁴² Therefore, “to consider Jesus Christ as Liberator in the African situation is much more than just a metaphor.”¹⁴³ Jesus Christ the liberator and the liberation of Jesus Christ, according to him, offer the hermeneutical and “methodological” paradigm,

¹³⁷ Nyamiti, “Contemporary African Christologies,” 66.

¹³⁸ Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 130.

¹³⁹ Laurenti Magesa, “Christ the Liberator and Africa Today,” in J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, *Jesus in African Christianity*, 79-92, at 85 and 91. Bracket mine.

¹⁴⁰ Magesa, “Christ the Liberator and Africa Today,” 91.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 82-83

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

the theological “vision” and “content”, and the practical orientation for a “liberating Christology.” He brings these various elements together in his description of the liberating Christology as follows:

“When we reflect on and speak of Jesus as Liberator, then we refer to His assurance of solidarity with us, particularly but not exclusively as Church, in the struggle – His struggle – to diminish poverty among the masses of the people. We refer to His commitment to forming the rule of God by refusing to accept as right, sinful structures of religious or civil domination, corruption and tribalism. Christ is Liberator because He is at once the foundation, the inspiration, the basic reason and the guarantor of the ultimate success of the struggle for the liberation of the human person, for development and healing-idealistically, through the Church. Our Christology is thus also concretely ecclesiology: Christ as Liberator; the Church as ideally the agent and articulator of Christ’s liberation in the world. This is the sum of the content of a liberating Christology.”¹⁴⁴

In referring to the insights of these three pioneers of African theology at the beginning of this section, I wish to show that liberation has been a central item in African theology, particularly in African Christology – the effort to represent the reality and significance of Jesus Christ. It has also been a pressing issue for theological reflections “on the function, meaning and theology of the church in Africa.”¹⁴⁵ I have also referred to the insights of these pioneer theologians, Nyamiti and Magesa, in order to provide an initial, brief outline, and to highlight something of the context, sources, and concern of the African liberation Christologists, properly so called. And in what follows, I shall closely engage the works of two prominent, contemporary liberation Christologists: Cameroonian Jean Marc Éla and Ghanaian Mercy Amba Oduyoye. Laurenti Magesa himself identifies these authors as the most outstanding representatives of this second trend in African Christology in recent memory.¹⁴⁶

Obviously, Jean Marc Éla and Mercy Amba Oduyoye take a liberative approach in the way they re-present the person and saving work of Jesus Christ (as truly human and truly divine) for the transformation of African societies. So, it is safe to classify their works under the second major division or trend – “Christologies of liberation”. Their points of departure and reference “are found in both a “christology from below”, beginning with the man, Jesus of Nazareth, and highlighting the liberating dimensions of his ministry,” in the challenging realities of faith and life in the African context.¹⁴⁷ Like other Christologists of liberation, our two representative thinkers consider their task to be the discernment of a “liberating Christology,” as already described above. In this view, it might not be too early to mention that in their constructive re-imagination of the popular image of Christ, particularly as liberator, they tend to sound overly reactionary, ideological, and exclusive.

Against this background and in line with the purpose of the present chapter, the question that remains is this: have the theological reflections on the image of Christ as

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴⁵ Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*, 85.

¹⁴⁶ See Laurenti Magesa, “The Political Axis of African Liberation Theology,” in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-economic and Cultural Paradigms*, BETL 135, ed. G. De Schrijver (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 130-152, at 144-146.

¹⁴⁷ Stinton, “Jesus of Africa,” in *The Myriad Christ*, 295.

liberator offered Christological perspectives for deepening the African Christians' *relation* to Christ and to others, and for engaging the *agency* of the African Christians, towards a mode of *action* that is required to transform the present social conjuncture? Have their christological proposals helped in moving African society from the dominant situations of unbearable poverties, structural injustice and marginalization into a society that is an inclusive, integrated, and a just manifestation of God's loving plan for humankind? Does their re-imagination of the identity and work of Christ as liberator provide outlines for a change of disposition and for inspiring practices of liberation (transformation), especially amongst Christians in the African context? I begin the investigation in this trend with Jean Marc Éla.

2.2. Jean Marc Éla: The African *Cry* for a Liberating Christ (Faith)

Jean Marc Éla is a renowned Cameroonian sociologist and theologian, who is widely acclaimed for his critical and engaging reimagination of the identity and saving work of Christ, particularly as Liberator. Éla was deeply involved in the "search for faith and experiences of faith in local communities."¹⁴⁸ He argues that any question related to "the Christian faith and the transformation of African societies...cannot be separated from reflection on the life of the people of God."¹⁴⁹ Drawing from his experience of living and working among the rural people of Kridi, North Cameroon, comprising mainly of peasant farmers, poor women and children, he writes what has been described as "a highly contextualized theology."¹⁵⁰ He provides a moving description of the "birthplace" or, if I may use the words of Jon Sobrino, "the social-theological setting" of his (Éla) theology.

"My reflections were born from practical experience among peasants faced with famine, drought, and sickness. For a long time, I was involved in the life of villages that had been crushed by the weight of deep injustices and frustrations. I was led to the difficulties and questionings of communities stirred by the Word of God. As I became their companion in their "little steps of liberation," I could no longer think about any aspect of faith without reassessing its impact on the future of marginalized peasants. In the midst of constraints and tensions, threats and misunderstandings, the gospel becomes a fountain of living water from which we can draw the strength to move ahead. It illuminates the great questions of existence and nourishes the hope of the poor. This reading of the gospel through the eyes of the little ones of the earth constitutes the background of my reflection."¹⁵¹

Therefore, in his theological reflections and pastoral engagement, he privileges the image of Christ the Liberator, which for him is the comprehensible image that speaks to the struggle for faith and life amongst those "rejected by history," many of whom are found within "the local Christian communities" and "at the grassroots."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Éla, *My Faith as An African*, 55.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Stinton, "Jesus of Africa," 299.

¹⁵¹ Éla, "Preface," in *My Faith as An African*, xvii-xviii.

¹⁵² See, for example, Jean-Marc Ela, *From Charity to Liberation* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1990); *My Faith as An African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); *African Cry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991 and Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock

And for his approach and sources, he adapts and draws clearly from the “directives” contained in the writings of the Church hierarchy “as well as in the conclusions of the 1977 Pan-African Conference of the Third World Theologians in Accra.”¹⁵³ Diane Stinton commenting on Éla’s reference to these sources writes:

“Éla asserts that the Final Communiqué from this conference is a landmark in that it not only acknowledges the new challenge for African theology to manifest “the liberation of our people from a cultural captivity”, but also admits that the oppression extends beyond culture to political, economic, and social structures. Hence Accra confirmed that “African theology must also be liberation theology.”¹⁵⁴

Éla considers the Final Communiqué from this conference as a rich resource for the development of African Liberation Theology which should be based on what Laurenti Magesa calls a “liberating Christology,” or expresses as “the liberation of Christ in Africa.”¹⁵⁵ For Éla this “Liberating Christology” or simply put, “Liberation Christology” has a twofold task of “liberating the Christian faith in Africa,” and “liberating the human person in Africa.” These were the main themes and the central argument of his two Magna opus: *My Faith as an African* and *The African Cry*, which we shall engage with in our discussion of Éla’s Liberation Christology in relation to the quest for social transformation in Africa.

Éla presents the meaning of this Christological image in the light of “three main critical issues or concerns which are interrelated.”¹⁵⁶ The first major issue which Éla points to for an understanding of the image of Christ as liberator is concerning the quest by many African theologians for the emancipation of African Christianity, and consequently Christology, from the “ethnocentrism of European theology,” which has dominated Christianity and theology for centuries.¹⁵⁷ This dominance, according to Éla, has resulted in the “Babylonian captivity,”¹⁵⁸ or what John Pobee refers to as the “North Atlantic Captivity”¹⁵⁹ of African Christianity to Roman structures, doctrine, and practices.¹⁶⁰ In line with this, Éla rightly argues that the Christological image of Christ the liberator would entail that Christology first be freed from the attendant Christologies that present an “abstract” Christ dispossessed of “a personal and tangible reality,” disincarnated and “locked within the conceptual framework of Greco-Latin philosophies and neo-Thomist

Publishers, 2005); “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 136-153; “The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ,” in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*, trans. and ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 17-35; *Repenser la théologie africaine: Le Dieu qui libère* (Paris: Karthala, 2003).

¹⁵³ Stinton, “Jesus of Africa,” 300.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Magesa, “Christ the Liberator and Africa Today,” 82.

¹⁵⁶ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 194. I am greatly indebted to Stinton’s analysis of the Christological reflections and contributions of Jean-Marc Éla to the present formulation and dominant expressions of Christ as liberator in African Christianity.

¹⁵⁷ Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 154, cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 194.

¹⁵⁸ Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 154.

¹⁵⁹ John Pobee, “Jesus Christ – The Life of the World: An African Perspective,” *Ministerial Formation* 21 (1983): 5.

¹⁶⁰ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 194.

metaphysically-grounded theologies.¹⁶¹ He expresses the idea further and points to the urgency of taking the christological image of Christ the liberator seriously. He says:

“At a time when the urgent need for Christology is felt in Africa, it is imperative to liberate the faith of the local churches from formulae that have the effect of obscuring Jesus from being recognized by other people because they emanate from a sort of foreign cultural monopoly. Shouldn't we question the validity of approaches that take no consideration at all of the tensions and conflicts in the context of which the people of today hear the gospel in contemporary African societies?”¹⁶²

Éla considers this questioning very important, given what he maintains are “faulty Christologies” arising from the collusion of Western Christianity with colonial conquest and the slave trade.¹⁶³ These Christologies were also propagated by some of the missionaries to Africa, who formulated and employed “an imperial image of Christ,” used to justify oppressive powers, and a “slave-trader Christ,” “used to promote faith as escapism from present suffering through promise of heavenly bliss.”¹⁶⁴ Consequently, against any presentation of Jesus Christ via a theology of the “salvation of souls,” Éla continually insists that “salvation in Jesus Christ *is* liberation from every form of slavery.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, according to him, the Church (often referring to the hierarchy, in most of his comments) ought to witness to this salvation by creating conditions that liberate humans and allow them to thrive.

The second issue which is also very enlightening and helpful for understanding the meaning and implications of the christological image of the liberator is what Éla identifies as “the traps of inculturation”¹⁶⁶ or “the dead-ends of ethno-theology.”¹⁶⁷ It is related to the tendency found amongst many African theologians in their effort to integrate the African pre-Christian religious-cultural heritage with the Christian faith. In order to affirm the unique identity and selfhood of the African Christian, all in the name of inculturation, certain authors continually pay insufficient attention to the African person and to his or her individual and social concrete reality, when such individuals are in fact the concrete subject of history, and they remain at the epicentre of every context. Here, Éla criticizes the attempts to reinterpret Jesus in Africa, which are limited to a theology of simply “digging

¹⁶¹ Éla, “The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ,” 20. For a similar discussion of the meaning of Christ the liberator, and its significance for African Christology, see Laurenti Magesa, “Christ the Liberator and Africa Today,” in J.N.K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa, *Jesus in African Christianity*, 80-92. Magesa, in a large part of the work, offers some methodological and contextual considerations for “liberating Christology.” In the light of these considerations he argues that “Jesus as Liberator” in the African situation is therefore much more than just a metaphor. “It is an attempt,” he maintains “to present the only Jesus that can be comprehensible and credible among the African rural masses, urban poor and idealistic youth.” On this issue, both Éla and Magesa seem to suggest that the liberation of the African would come about through a liberation of Christology, and consequently of Christianity in Africa.

¹⁶² Éla, “The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ,” 20.

¹⁶³ Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 111, cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 194.

¹⁶⁴ Jean-Marc Éla, “Le Motif de la libération dans la théologie africaine,” *Les nouvelles rationalités africaines* 2, no. 5 (1986): 43, translated and cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 194.

¹⁶⁵ Éla, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” 142.

¹⁶⁶ Jean-Marc Éla, “Globalisation et pauperisation: Un défi à la théologie africaine,” in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. G. De Schrijver (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 161-165, translated by and cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 194.

¹⁶⁷ Éla, “The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ,” 19-20.

the sources” found in the traditional African culture. So, he maintains that inculturation Christologies are insufficient for enabling the Christian faith in Africa to face the challenge of current socio-economic and political crisis.

Along the same line, Éla notes a third concern towards a more robust appropriation of the christological image of liberator. It is what has been referred to as “the irruption of the Third World,” precisely, its epistemological rupture from Western Christology.¹⁶⁸ This rupture, according to Éla, is necessary for doing Christology more meaningfully and effectively from within the grassroots Christian communities. For him, it is also vital if we really wish to rediscover the identity and mission of Christ from the “periphery” and its implication for the “actual situation in Africa.”¹⁶⁹ Elsewhere, Éla offers a socio-political analysis of the situation in Africa with its many unfortunate realities and burden of underdevelopment. According to him, they range from the disillusionment with flag independences across the continent, through the international domination perpetuating injustice in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, to the internal factors stemming from widespread neo-colonialism.¹⁷⁰ It is against these backdrops that he questions and responds to the meaning of Christ the liberator. That is why for him, he concludes that “it is impossible to attempt an overall interpretation of the Good News from our African situation without making liberation the fundamental axis of a theology (Christology) which comes from our people.”¹⁷¹

Éla seems to adopt what could safely be referred to as direct analogical interpretation of the meaning of Jesus’s identity and work as liberator. Over and again, he transposes the image of Jesus as liberator into the mission of the Church (hierarchy in particular), and in turn, into the dimensions of the African society that is in dire need of liberation and transformation. But he does not sufficiently account for, and so, it is not very clear, how the concrete image of Jesus’s person and action as liberator provide an adequate basis for analogous action in the (present) social conjuncture of Africa. He succeeds in only making somewhat extravagant assertions of what the Church should look like and do in order to witness to Christ as Liberator.

¹⁶⁸ See Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians, “Final Statement” (Tanzania 1976), in *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Developing World*, ed. Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), 259, referred to by Éla, “The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ,” 18. See also Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres, eds., *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 194-195.

¹⁶⁹ Éla, “The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ,” 18-19.

¹⁷⁰ See Éla, “Christianity and Liberation in Africa,” 137-139, cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 195.

¹⁷¹ Éla, “Le Motif de la liberation dans la theologie africaine,” 38, translated and cited in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 195.

2.3. Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Liberating Christ for (African) Women

Another contemporary African (liberation) theologian who has received widespread acclaim is Mercy Amba Oduyoye (b. 1934).¹⁷² Oduyoye is one of the foremost representatives of African feminist theology.¹⁷³ She is a Ghanaian Methodist theologian known for her work in African women's theology. In addition, Oduyoye is the founder and a pioneer member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and a onetime director of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana.¹⁷⁴

Mercy Oduyoye identifies her “passion” and considers the thrust of her theological thought to be the emancipation of the African woman.¹⁷⁵ Hence, her point of departure and focus are the suffering and liberation of women, on the one hand, and the ‘liberation’ of Christ from being that male saviour for women, on the other hand. According to her, women’s experiences and concerns are the (often forgotten) *locus* of theology in general and of Christology in particular.¹⁷⁶ Oduyoye is thoroughly convinced that a reflection upon the various forms of marginalization and oppression suffered by women under (overly patriarchal) African cultural traditions, Western Christianity, ecclesial structures, and contemporary social, political and economic conjuncture, offer new insights into the meaning and significance of Christ’s identity and work in Africa today. From this perspective, for her part, Diane Stinton points out: “Like women theologians throughout

¹⁷² For a brief presentation of Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s life and work, see Elizabeth Amoah, “Preface,” in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), xvii-xx.

¹⁷³ She is one of the earliest contributors (with her work *Introducing African Women’s Theology*) to the series *Introducing Feminist Theology*. ITF is a renowned series of the British and Irish Schools of Feminist Theology. The Series is “committed to the global family of feminist theologies, as part of the universal struggle of women for justice and the recognition of full humanity.” Mary Grey, “Editor’s Preface,” in Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd., 2001), 7. See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

¹⁷⁴ It is said that Mercy Amba Oduyoye “organized what is believed to be the first pan-African women’s theology conference in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1980; and that, in fact, she is the initiator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Story of a Circle,” *The Ecumenical Review* 53 (2001): 97-100. See also, Nyambura Njoroge, “A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians,” *Missiology: An International Review* 33 (2005): 29-46. In the article Njoroge offers an account of “the historical events and the strong and collaborative leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye...that led to the launching and creation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989.” According to her, “[t]he Circle, as it is commonly referred to in Africa, is an interfaith association that aims at producing theological literature by encouraging and mentoring women to research, write, and publish in the wide scope of religion and culture.” Njoroge, “A New Way of Facilitating Leadership,” 29.

¹⁷⁵ See Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988). See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Christian Feminism and African Culture: The ‘Hearth’ of the Matter,” in *The Future of Liberation Theologies: Essays in Honour of Gustavo Gutierrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 441-449.

¹⁷⁶ Stephanie Lowery, in praise of the life and work of Oduyoye, remarks: “With a publishing career beginning in the late 1960s and including multiple books and over 80 articles, she has consistently advocated on behalf of African women. As a feminist, she is concerned with all who are marginalized, without a voice or an agency, dehumanized and without dignity. For her entire career she has sought to liberate African women who are “doubly and triply burdened” by religion...culture, (social, economic, and political realities).” Stephanie Lowery, *Identity and Ecclesiology: Their Relationship among Select African Theologians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 67.

the Third World,” Mercy Amba Oduyoye and most “African women theologians identify Christology as a fundamental quest in which they seek primarily to articulate the images of Jesus they encounter in the popular religiosity of their own communities.”¹⁷⁷ This shift explains why for Oduyoye and other women theologians, one of the main tasks of Christology is the re-interpretation of the symbols and images used to communicate the reality of Christ-event for humankind.¹⁷⁸ Oduyoye believes such a re-interpretation will dismantle oppressive forms of patriarchy, and will further help to foster the emancipation of African women.¹⁷⁹

For Oduyoye the whole project of christological re-imagination must be set as the “struggle for justice, fullness of life and loving caring relationship” for women, and the appropriation of the image of Christ that not only arises from, but speaks to, this struggle.¹⁸⁰ experiences. This is why she thinks the first and foremost task of Christology should consist of probing and critiquing “the traditional statements of Christology” that does not “take into account women’s experiences of life.”¹⁸¹ This will then be followed by the articulation of some christological insights in response to the dehumanizing conditions of women in many African societies.¹⁸² She summarizes the way of this christological venture in the following words: “The women take into account what traditional Christology teaches and what the Bible says, but what they make of all of this and of the Christ arise out of their own and other women’s experience of the Christ.”¹⁸³ She explains that this way of doing Christology in Africa is important because:

“Christology down the ages, though derived from the experiences of the early companions of Jesus of Nazareth and those of their immediate associates, has been formulated in response to the actual historical realities of each age and place. Persons have contributed by the way each perceives and experiences Christ. “Christ” has *been explained* through imagery, cosmology, and historical events understood by both “speakers” and “listeners.” This process continues in Africa. One thing is certain: whatever the age or place, the most articulate Christology is that silently performed in the drama of everyday living.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁷ Stinton, “African Women’s Liberation Christologies,” in *Jesus of Africa*, 198.

¹⁷⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Passion out of Compassion: Women of the EATWOT Third General Assembly,” *International Review of Mission* 81 (1992): 313-318, at 316. Such is the goal of the essays in the edited volume by MaryAnne Stevens ed., *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993).

¹⁷⁹ For a similar line of thinking, which Oduyoye privileges, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated from Patriarchy?” in Stevens, *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol*, 7-29.

¹⁸⁰ See Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah, “The Christ for African Women,” in Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion*, 35-46, at 35. See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Experience of God through the Eyes of an Akan Woman,” *Cross Currents* 47, no. 4 (Winter 1997/1998): 493-504.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸² See Oduyoye, “Jesus Christ,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151-170. See also Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Introduction,” in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992), 1-6.

¹⁸³ Oduyoye, “The Passion out of Compassion,” 316.

¹⁸⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah, “The Christ for African Women,” 45. Emphasis in the original. See also Oduyoye, “Christian Feminism and African Culture,” 449.

In her *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, Oduyoye strongly identifies the person and the salvific and redeeming work of Christ in terms of liberation.¹⁸⁵ Christ the Liberator is an image she highly commends in her christological reflection. And she sets forth to critically examine what this widespread christological notion that Christ liberates means and implies especially for women. In a way that comes closer to the approach of Aylward Shorter and Ukachukwu Chris Manus, Oduyoye privileges the use of African traditional sources, what is commonly referred to as the “unwritten scriptures” of the Fante of Ghana.¹⁸⁶ For her, in this source, one encounters a moving narration of the Fante legend of a woman who served as a “Christ-figure, anointed of God to bring victory over all powers that seek to alienate women from the road to true humanity.”¹⁸⁷ And, so, it seems she sometimes tries to (re)presents the image of Christ in feminine terms.

While Oduyoye draws largely from these traditional African religious-cultural sources, she, however, combines the insights therefrom with perspectives from the biblical tradition. For her, this combination was a way of bringing the sources into critical dialogue, in order to disentangle some of the harmful elements that have been used to subjugate women.¹⁸⁸ What is more, in Oduyoye’s christological reflections, the biblical and African traditions are also combined with contemporary realities.¹⁸⁹ Diane Stinton comments further on the dominant tone in Oduyoye’s overall approach and in her reference to these sources. According to Stinton, Oduyoye’s christological thinking about liberation, “which she situates in a context of racism, sexism, and religious pluralism,” like Jean Marc Éla’s liberation Christology, “contemplates a fundamental “cry” that she (Oduyoye) identifies as a universal cry for salvation.”¹⁹⁰ In fact, Stephanie Lowery says that Oduyoye’s theology of women and for women draws on insights from “her examinations of the South African Kairos Document and Jean-Marc Ela’s *African Cry*.”¹⁹¹

On the meaning and significance of the image of Christ as liberator of the *African woman*, Oduyoye precisely refers to Jesus Christ as *Agyenkwa*, a category which for the Akans in Ghana means “the liberator” or the “the rescuer.”¹⁹² She draws on the insights of the work (published reflections, stories, and prayers of praise to Jesus) of Afua Kuma to argue that Christ is *Agyenkwa*. Afua Kuma is an ‘illiterate’ Ghanaian woman. She lives and works in the tropical forest of Ghana, is active as a village midwife, and belongs to the Church of the Pentecost. In her daily life and struggles, Kuma faithfully voices her prayers and praises which are directed mostly to Christ. According to Oduyoye, Afua Kuma’s

¹⁸⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

¹⁸⁶ Oduyoye and Amoah, “The Christ for African Women,” 35, cited also in Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 198.

¹⁸⁷ Oduyoye and Amoah, “The Christ for African Women,” 38. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 199.

¹⁸⁸ See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Liberative Ritual and African Religion,” in *Popular Religion, Liberation and Contextual Theology*, ed. Jacques Van Nieuwenhove and Berma Klein Goldewijk, 70-79.

¹⁸⁹ Stinton mentions this point in *Jesus of Africa*, 199.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Lowery, “Mercy Amba Oduyoye,” in *Identity and Ecclesiology*, 68.

¹⁹² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 98.

experience and proclamation of Christ is a Christology “that comes from the interplay of faith and life.”¹⁹³

“From Afua’s words one gets some insight into what Christ (as liberator) means for many in African churches to whom the word of God comes as a story, and who then make their own connections with Christ as they go about their daily routine, as well as in the high points of life.”¹⁹⁴

Christ the *Agyenkwa* (liberator) is “the one who rescues, holds your life in safety, takes you out of a life-denying situation and places you in a life-affirming one.”¹⁹⁵ He practically “plucks you from dehumanising ambiance and places you in a position where you can grow toward authentic humanity... and gives you back your life in all its wholeness and fullness.”¹⁹⁶ In this connection, Oduyoye goes on to argue that it is the “imagery of God in Christ as Redeemer that speaks clearly to Africa.”¹⁹⁷

Furthermore, Oduyoye and Elizabeth Amoah, another feminist Christologist, together aver that the image of Christ the liberator is all the more applicable to the specific experiences of women, whom “Christ liberated by being born of Mary, and demanding that the woman bent double with gynaecological disorders should stand up straight” (Mk 5,25-34; Lk 13,10-17).¹⁹⁸ Thus, “the practice of making women become silent “beasts” of societies’ burdens, bent double under racism, poverty, and lack of appreciation of what fullness of womanhood should be, has been annulled and countered by Christ,” who “transcends and transforms culture and has liberated us to do the same.”¹⁹⁹ From this, Oduyoye concludes that, the image of Christ as liberator in African Christianity, “gives us (women) *hope* for space in which to be truly and fully human. The Liberator will set us free through the process of redemption.”²⁰⁰ Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike shares a similar view. She points to the same image of Christ the liberator as the source of hope in the transformation of oppressive structures that subjugate and dehumanize people, especially women.²⁰¹

There is no doubt about the idea that Jesus and the reign of the Kingdom of God he inaugurated have motivated commitment to liberation from oppressive patriarchal and gender-oriented forms of life. But to present and to emphasize this liberation in a manner that sounds almost simply lamentational, and that appears somewhat exclusive, will not be of immense help in the common search for the transformation of societies in Africa. Such

¹⁹³ Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Christ for African Women,” 42.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* A selection of lines from the stanzas of the prayers and praises of Afua Kuma is worth citing in view of underlining its significance for the christological thinking of Oduyoye and other African women theologians about Christ as liberator.

¹⁹⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 98. See also *Beads and Strands*, 18.

¹⁹⁶ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 98.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁹⁸ Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Christ for African Women,” 43.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 102. Emphasis mine.

²⁰¹ See Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, “Christology and an African Woman’s Experience,” in Mugambi and Magesa, *Jesus in African Christianity*, 123-135; *idem*, “Christology and an African Woman’s Experience,” in Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 70-81. For a detailed discussion of this idea, see Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

a search, I maintain, must be for all, by all, and with all, in an egalitarian spirit of collective unity.²⁰²

2.4. Critiquing the Liberationist Claims

Éla and Oduyoye's re-imagination of the Christ as the Liberator comes, at best, as an individualised, privileged theological proposal for a new way of being and acting that is mainly directed to the hierarchy of the church. In their proposal, they also sound rather lamentational, and at times even reflect what is a highly reactionary tone. Their determination for the liberation of "the Christian faith" in Éla, and of "African women" in Oduyoye, also, appears to be exclusive, and sometimes divisive along the lines of us-and-them: Africans versus Westerners; women versus men. Nyambura Njoroge, a feminist theologian, whose work on Oduyoye I already cited, admits as much. Njoroge captures the tone and style of the theologians like Oduyoye, who belong to this trend, in the following words:

"Not surprisingly, our death-dealing context and senseless suffering has forced some of us in the Circle to turn to theology of lamentation as has been the case in most of my writings. It is not enough to argue like John Mbiti, a pioneering African theologian from Kenya, that "one would hope that theology arises out of spontaneous joy in being a Christian, responding to life and ideas as one redeemed." I can attest to the fact that when I am deeply depressed, disillusioned, angry, and lack words because of the deafening silence of the church on social injustices and evil, (...) the only language I understand is lamentation and that is when I have written most of my articles."²⁰³

To be clear, I appreciate the tone, or rather, the cry of lament, and do not want in any way to undercut its legitimacy not just as a theological hermeneutical key, but very importantly, as a revelatory resource. For one, lament awakens our consciousness to the painful reality of the suffering of people, which is also in itself a compelling theological issue in our world today.²⁰⁴ This is to say that lament is both a legitimate human and theological reality. We cannot sound deaf ears and minds to the cries of the oppressed. We hear God in those voices of lament, such that to undermine them as inconsequential or even to deny them is to deny the voice of God that we claim to be listening to and reflecting upon in our theological conversations. "It is a form of mourning, but it is purposeful," as Denise Ackermann, a South African theologian and a member of the Circle expresses.²⁰⁵ Lament awakens us to the fact that relationships (with God and his people) have gone

²⁰² Anthony Atansi, "Option for the Poor as Option for All, by All, and with All" (unpublished paper submitted for the course work "Contextual Theologies: Challenges and Methods" 2014-2015 Academic year).

²⁰³ Njoroge, "A New Way of Facilitating Leadership," 40. See also Nyambura Njoroge and Musa Dube, eds., *Talitha Cum!: Theologies of African Women* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001).

²⁰⁴ The Ugandan theologian, Emmanuel Katongole, has also employed "lament" as a theological hermeneutical lens for his work on "the theology and politics of hope in Africa." See Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017).

²⁰⁵ Denise Ackermann, "Implications of HIV and AIDS for the Theological Agenda," cited in Njoroge, "A New Way of Facilitating Leadership," 41.

terribly wrong; and it reminds God that God must act, and we much act too.²⁰⁶ For “it refuses to settle for things the way they are.”²⁰⁷ In short, lament bears a christological import. It draws out our “Christ nature”, which is that capacity to *see* and acknowledge the suffering around us, to *judge* them rightly, and to *act* in a way that can relieve the suffering.

That said, the point remains that to use lament in a highly accusatory and exclusionary manner, as we saw in the works of our liberation Christologists, does not unleash its fullest potential as a resource for Christians’ social engagement. Doing so instead fetters the positive energy needed for a more fruitful christological reflections that could inspire socially transformative practices amongst Christians. Interestingly, Njoroge herself, in another (later) work titled “Beyond Suffering and Lament: Theology of Hope and Life,” admits that the search for the transformation of Africa must go “beyond the shout of suffering and lament.”²⁰⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether is another Feminist theologian, who is critical of the tone and form of lament in many Feminist theological writings.²⁰⁹ Radford Ruether rightly observes that in many of these writings, the dominant understanding of Jesus Christ is “a heroic warrior who will deliver victims from oppression, punish the oppressors, and create an ideal earth freed from sin and want.”²¹⁰ The victims, in the case of our authors, Éla and Oduyoye, are mainly Africans and women, respectively. Radford Ruether is critical of this view. According to her, such an understanding of Christ has beneath it, “the thirst for revenge upon those who have secured their own privilege at the expense of others.”²¹¹ She underscores the fact that, such messianic myths filled with revengeful cries do not really dismantle break structures of oppression. Rather they bear the possibility of reproducing the sequence of oppression, and creating “new victims and new victimizers.”²¹² For this reason, and as a corrective to this proclivity in liberation theologies, she argues that there is need for a “new Christology.” This new Christology, the kind that Africa urgently needs today, and which I propose in this dissertation, should be, in the words of Jesse Mugambi:

“...inclusive rather than exclusive; proactive rather than reactive; complementary rather than competitive; integrative rather than disintegrative; all people-centred rather than institution-centred; regenerative rather than degenerative; future-sensitive rather than past-sensitive; co-operative rather than confrontational.”²¹³

The new (transformative) Christology is possible on the basis of a radical affirmation of the one historical figure of Jesus Christ as the unique incarnation of God’s creating Logos.²¹⁴ And in the light of this affirmation, we are enabled to “overturn the messianic

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Nyambura J. Njoroge, “Beyond Suffering and Lament: Theology of Hope and Life,” in *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 113-120.

²⁰⁹ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Faith and Ecofeminism: Religion and the Liberation of Women and the Earth from Oppression,” in *The Task of Theology: Leading Theologians on the Most Compelling Questions for Today*, ed. Anselm K. Min (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 191-205.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 202-203.

²¹¹ Ibid., 203.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Jesse Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War*, 17.

²¹⁴ Radford Ruether, “Faith and Ecofeminism,” 202.

myth.”²¹⁵ We do so by (re)presenting Jesus “as an anti-messiah calling us to rediscover the community of equals that appears when the system of... victimizers and victims, of rich and poor,” of male and female, of white and black, of Westerners and Africans, of us and them, is dismantled.²¹⁶ Only then, are we able to create communities and societies of mutual flourishing.

3. Reconstructing Christ

3.1. Introducing Reconstruction Christologies

The theological interest in the relation between christological belief (its expression in certain images) and the transformation of the social context of Africa is clearly seen in the third trend of African theology, namely, the Christology of Reconstruction.²¹⁷ Theologians who belong to this trend emphasize the christological foundation for the social transformation of Africa. This trend of African Christology (theology) was born in the early 1990s following the fall of communism and the end of apartheid regime in South Africa. It was precisely in November 1991, during the symposium on the “Problems and Promises of the Church in Africa in the 1990s and Beyond,” which was convened in Mombasa, Kenya, that the theme of “Theology of Reconstruction” was launched. The leading theologians in the field of reconstruction claimed to unveil “a theology that puts special emphasis on social transformation of the African continent.”²¹⁸

According to Jesse Mugambi, who had been invited by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, then the president of the All African Council of Churches (AACC), to present the keynote lecture at the symposium: “the key terms in African Christian theology for the twenty-first

²¹⁵ Ibid., 203.

²¹⁶ Ibid; also in Atansi, “Option for the Poor as Option for All, by All, and with All.”

²¹⁷ The other two trends are inculturation and liberation. See, for example, Raymond Moloney, “African Christology,” 505-515. For a discussion of the three theological (christological) trends, see Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Trends in African since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation*, 2nd ed. (Leberit Rome 2005). For a summary discussion of these trends within a broader perspective than missiological which I cite for the purpose of this article, see Oborji, “Inculturation and African Theology: The Paradoxes of the Paradigm Shifts,” www.foborji.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Inculturation-and-African-Theology-October-2016.pdf [accessed April 29, 2018].

²¹⁸ Oborji, “Inculturation and African Theology,” 16. Some of the pioneers of this trend and their works include Jesse Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after Cold War* (1995); idem, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003); idem, “Theology of Reconstruction,” in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, ed. Diane B. Stinton (London: SPCK, 2010), 139-149; Jesse Mugambi ed., *Christian Mission and Social Transformation: A Kenyan Perspective* (Nairobi: National Council of Churches of Kenya, 1989); Kā Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa Envisioning the Future: Salvation in Christ and Building a New African Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004). Some of the secondary sources include Isaac M. T. Mwase and Eunice K. Kamaara eds., *Theologies of Liberation and Reconstruction: Essays in Honour of Professor J. N. K. Mugambi* (Nairobi: Acton Press, 2012); Laurenti Magesa, “A Portrait of Professor J. N. K. Mugambi’s Theological Project of Reconstruction: A Review Article of *Theologies of Liberation and Reconstruction: Essays in Honour of Professor J. N. K. Mugambi, Ph.D.*,” edited by Isaac M. T. Mwase and Eunice K. Kamaara,” *Studies in World Christianity* 19 (2013): 187-197; and Diane Stinton, “Reconstruction Theology in Action: Exploring the Significance of Jesse N.K. Mugambi’s Theological Contribution through a Case Study of Nairobi Chapel/Mauvuno Church in Nairobi, Kenya,” in Elias Kifon Bongmba, *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, 134-152.

century should be ‘reconstruction’ and ‘social transformation’.”²¹⁹ The Congolese philosopher and theologian, Kä Mana, whose thoughts I engage with at some length in the next subsection, was another foremost theologian of reconstruction present at the symposium. In his celebrated work on the third trend, Mana argues that, “the building of a new (African) society be based not on the logic of market economy, but on the logic of *Christological-Resurrection-Event* of Jesus Christ.”²²⁰

This significant pointer to the christological source, content, and grounding for transformative social engagement in the reconstructionist work of Mana have continued to inspire recent theologians whose works serve as a response and contribution to the urgent quest for social transformation in Africa. A renewed attention is paid to the christological imagination of African Christian consciousness, especially as it bears on “the transformative potential of religious faith.”²²¹ The attention to the christological dynamic in the quest for social transformation in Africa is clearly discernible in the work of Nigerian Evangelical theologian, Victor Ezigbo.²²² Like most practitioners of the ‘Reconstructionist trend’, Ezigbo follows the lead of Mana in arguing that a concrete engagement with the “Christ-Event” is significant for offering a meaningful and relevant theological response to the real and complex social problems of Africa.²²³ In what follows, I will engage the ideas of these two reconstructionist theologians in greater detail, on the connection between faith in Christ and transformation of African society, how christological faith can bring about or reinforce the sense of Christian social responsibility.

3.2. Kä Mana: Kerygmatic Christological Proposal

As we have mentioned, Kä Mana is one of the leading representative thinkers of the reconstructionist trend. He has been described as a “proficient philosopher, passionate Africanist and a convinced theologian.”²²⁴ In his work which “spans a number of conventional academic disciplines including philosophy, fundamental theology, psychology, poetry, literature, politics, ethics, biblical studies and philosophical anthropology,” Mana pays a reasonably substantial and “coherent” attention to the social realities of peoples of Africa.²²⁵ In the six books he published between 1992 and 2001 on the theology (Christology) of reconstruction, Mana considers the transformation of the social situation of Africa through the redemption of the Africans’ *imaginaire* from its brokenness as the decisive and ultimate goal.²²⁶ For this purpose, Mana privileges and takes

²¹⁹ See Valentin Dedji, *Reconstruction & Renewal in African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003), 38.

²²⁰ Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa*, 64-65 as cited in Oborji, “Inculturation and African Theology,” 15. Emphasis mine.

²²¹ See, for example, Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 94.

²²² Victor Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010).

²²³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

²²⁴ Valentin Dedji, “The Ethical Redemption of African Imaginaire: Kä Mana’s Theology of Reconstruction,” 255.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 256-257.

²²⁶ Kä Mana, *Foi Africaine, Crise Africaine et Reconstruction de l’Afrique* (1992); *Christ d’Afrique: Enjeux Ethiques de la Foi Africaine en Jésus-Christ* (1993); *L’Eglise Africaine et la Théologie de la Reconstruction*

on a deeply christological approach. Mana's central thesis is that African Christians should contribute to the social transformation of Africa by reclaiming their authentic self through their identification with Christ.²²⁷ For him, the identification with Christ, in the form of a christological anthropology, will allow for a viable interrogation with, and formulation of a critical response to, the social conditions in Africa.

Valentin Dedji has pointed out that Mana takes seriously the social issues of Africa. And in his christological interpretations, he views them as “‘new horizons’ and ‘renewed opportunities’ which God continually offers individuals and societies to become empowered with a new sense of responsibility and creativity, in order to reconstruct or invent new social structures for a better future for the human condition.”²²⁸ What is more, “Jesus’ teachings,” according to him, “offer African people and churches a ‘substantial leaven’ in order to reawaken their ‘dreamlike spirituality’, to recover their disintegrated social *imaginaire* and to promote a Christology of reconstruction.”²²⁹ The ‘Jesus-kerygma’, that is, the biblical accounts of Jesus’ words and deeds provides “an innovative power that is capable of injecting a creative dynamism...in order to initiate an ethical redemption of African social *imaginaire*,” and consequently, the transformation of the African society.²³⁰

Mana considers that the ethical redemption of the African person towards the “building of a new society” derives from his reconstruction of Christ kerygma. For him, the biblical portrayal of the way of being characteristic of Jesus should find application in the pastoral activity and programs that are designed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy as “from on-high.” I do not think that the solution from a christological ethic for the transformation of African society lies simply in the actions of bishops and priests or in them making proposals to the other Christians.²³¹ This bears the semblance of the way majority of the African Christians relate to Christ as one who will solve all their social problems and challenges because he is “true God” and, therefore, he can do all things for them. I rather envisage a christological ethic that finds expression in the actions of everyday Christians working together for the transformation of the social context of Africa. This would demand a new way of thinking and speaking of Christ so as to inspire a different kind of relation to him that will bring about transformation at a personal and communal level within the Christian community.

(1993); *Chrétien et Eglises d’Afrique: Penser l’Avenir* (1999), *Pour le Christianisme de la Vie et pour l’Afrique de l’Espoir* (1999), *La Nouvelle Evangelisation en Afrique* (2000). Of these works, the most familiar and accessible to English-speaking readers is his *Christians and Churches of Africa Envisioning the Future: Salvation in Christ and Building a New African Society*. It provides an excellent synthesis of the central theme of his christological re-imagination for the transformation of African societies. I shall rely heavily on it in this subsection, in which I discuss his christological views.

²²⁷ Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa Envisioning the Future*, 29-36, 56-63. See also Esther Acolatse, Review of *Christians and Churches of Africa Envisioning the Future*, by Kä Mana, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11, no. 1 (2007): 160-162.

²²⁸ Dedji, “The Ethical Redemption of African *Imaginaire*: Kä Mana’s Theology of Reconstruction,” 257-258

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 264. Mana, *Christians and Churches of Africa Envisioning the Future*, 82-106.

²³¹ For a very brilliant, elaborate, and nuanced systematic-theological discussion of the challenge of hierarchy in the quest to realize the critical potential of Christian (christological) beliefs, see Kathryn Tanner’s “Christian Belief and the Justification of Hierarchy,” in her *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 127-156.

Besides, Mana's christocentric ethic seems overly a work of mimetic and idealised representation of what Christ did in the scriptures and can now do for the Africans. In this regard, Orobator's critical remarks about Mana's christological re-construction and the implications therefrom is correct. Orobator so rightly observes:

“When it comes to defining the “*ethique*” and “*pratique*” of managing Africa's crises and (re)constructing its future, Kä Mana provides only a selective and idealised account of how the Scripture “manages crises,” in the hope that the force of this analytical exercise would unleash the totality of the Africans' creative capacities (*l'imaginaire*) and supply a renewed confidence to construct “utopias” (*l'utopie*). Decidedly, this is a fascinating but an unconvincing feat of theological innovation.”²³²

Esther Acolatse, professor of pastoral theology at Knox College criticizes Kä Mana's christological kerygmatic proposal in even stronger terms. As Acolatse explains, at length:

“Laudable as his proposal seems, it reads like utopian propaganda which is not truly grounded in the reality of African Christian experience, not even of sub-Saharan Africa, which no doubt is his main source of inspiration as well as audience. What we are presented with is not unlike other triumphalistic visions of Christianity in Africa which only contradicts the violence and genocide within her borders. It is also not clear why he imagines Christianity as the necessary and appropriate vehicle for African self-understanding and nation-building. Given the current ferment on the continent, the wars and genocides that reverberate through many lands in spite of the noted vibrancy of Christianity and the church, a stronger case needs to be made for why *Christianity* and *Christ* are seen as the source of salvation (defined as true self-identity and nation-building) for Africa today. (...) Mana's agenda fits into other prescriptions for turning African states around, although he uses the language of reconstruction rather than liberation. Yet his new approach does not show this can be achieved, and becomes merely another prescription with no directions for achieving its *telos*.”²³³

Mana's “kerygmatic proposal” comes across as similar to Rudolf Bultmann's “kerygma as preaching”, which is often involving personal address and calling for faith. But if the transformation of society simply needs Christians with faith, then Africa possesses the advantage of numbers and public display of faith. I have shown from my account of the grassroots Christologies in the first chapter, that African Christians express so much “faith” in Jesus Christ. But the crucial question is about the character, content, and consequence of this faith in their lives and in the social sphere. And how can the faith be more critically appropriated and engaged so that it brings about the transformation of their lives and the society in which they live with other people? Let us see how another Reconstruction Christologist engages this question.

²³² Orobator, “The Sky is Wide Enough: A Historico-Critical Appraisal of Theological Activity and Method in Africa,” 40. Emphasis in the original.

²³³ Acolatse, “Review,” 161. Emphasis in the original. In a recent work, Acolatse critiques such African pastoral and social imagination that is merely prescriptive, and does not engage in a systematic theological analysis that is helpful for scrutinizing, and at the same time, affirming some aspect of African reality that could bring about the integral transformation Christians and theologians alike are urgently longing and labouring for. See Esther Acolatse, *For Freedom or Bondage?: A Critique of African Pastoral Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).

3.3. Victor Ezigbo: Revealer Christological Model

Victor Ezigbo is a contemporary Nigerian Evangelical theologian. He had worked extensively on a christological project, which he would later publish in the book titled *Re-Imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity*. The presupposition, sources, method, task and outcome of Ezigbo's christological project could be gleaned from the key words, "re-imagining" and "conversing", which are in the title of the book aforementioned.²³⁴ His effort in in these regards could also be seen in the christological chapter and christologically related themes in his two-volume textbooks that aim at introducing Christian theologies...from global Christian communities.²³⁵

Ezigbo's path to exploring the relation between christological belief and social transformation in Africa could be surmised from his focused attempt to construct a christological model. This model, according to him, will be useful for understanding, on the one hand, the meaning of Christ's presence and action in Africa, and, on the other hand, the implications of this presence and action in the present challenging realities of life on the continent. He considers that the construction of the "Revealer" christological model serves these purposes. According to him, this model exhibits a distinctive logic that is both local and global. In other words, his aim is also to re-imagine Christ in such a way that speaks to both the African person and to other human beings everywhere. He expresses it in the following way: "A Christology that does not aim to contribute to the development of christological discourses universally is parochial and can hardly have any impact on the twenty-first century world." This is an overly ambitious goal that detracts from the very urgent matter of creating a Christology that will bring about or contribute to the transformation of African society. Like Ezigbo himself also insists at the beginning of his work, "it must be said that in this twenty-first century, the perennial challenge that faces many African theologians is not the Missionary (Western) Christology or, constructing an African Christology that will replace or appeal to the former, but rather how to offer a critical christological imagination that will relate more fully to the African confidence in the transforming potential of the Christian faith, and that will engage the new contexts and social realities in which African peoples live."²³⁶ He pushes this idea further in his well-researched and ethnographic survey of the "grassroots Christologies", and in his discussion of the "constructive Christologies" of contemporary African Christianity.²³⁷

After a painstaking analysis of the "presuppositions, sources, issues and themes" in these Christologies, Ezigbo considers that they are inadequate, especially the grassroots Christologies, because in them Jesus Christ is mainly perceived and related to "as a problem solver."²³⁸ For this reason, and in his response to this shortcoming, Ezigbo argues that there

²³⁴ See also Victor I. Ezigbo, "Rethinking the Sources of African Contextual Christology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 132 (November 2008): 53-70.

²³⁵ Victor I. Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies: Voices from Global Christian Communities*, Volume 1 (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2013); idem, *Introducing Christian Theologies: Voices from Global Christian Communities*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2015).

²³⁶ Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 19.

²³⁷ Ibid., 103-142, 54-103, respectively.

²³⁸ Ibid., 139.

is need for a new christological model that will enable African Christians and theologians “to rediscover that Jesus does not come to us merely as the one who provides all our needs; he also shapes our understandings of our needs.”²³⁹ Drawing upon the revelation discourses in both African and Western theological milieu, Ezigbo develops and proposes what he refers to as the “Revealer Christology model”. According to him, this model following the “dialectic-holistic” approach will help the African Christian to better appropriate the Christ-Event in a more relational manner, and towards a more critical confrontation of “the actual dehumanizing social conditions many people experience” in the continent.²⁴⁰

I find Ezigbo’s “Revealer Christology model” very illuminating. For one, the author uses the model in order to critique forms of religious narratives which have enervated people’s capacity to assume agency for their lives as they waste precious time in endless prayers and devotions. Thus, with his model he offers insightful reflection on the meaning and function of Jesus Christ, and its implications, especially for rethinking the understanding of the human (African Christian) agent and his or her place in the process of the transformation of African society.

But here lies the problem with Ezigbo’s overly doctrinal narration of Christ’s identity and work as Revealer for the transformation of Africa. The reality of Christ is located simply as an intangible ‘referent’ for re-imagining the Christian response to the problems that confront the Christians and non-Christians alike. This problem comes out most clearly when Ezigbo says that the Revealer model helps the Christian *to think* of Christ not as problem solver but as one who helps him or her to understand the problem. This misses the mark of how the African Christian typically and rightly understands the person and work of Christ. The African Christian does not see Christ merely as a “referent”. He or she, as we saw in our examination of the images of Christ, confesses and holds on to Christ as one who is still alive and active.²⁴¹ Hence, Christ for the African Christian is present and active in their midst as one who is indeed capable of acting for them and crucially, with them. Hence, the image of Christ as healer, liberator and king, or as the bringer of social transformation requires not merely a notional acknowledgement or another form of dogmatic abstraction, but an embodied translation in a way that inspires a real and ongoing transformation in the Christians so as to become more fully involved in the transformation of their societies.

3.4. Appraisal of the Reconstructionist Approach

From our discussion in the preceding chapter on the grassroots christological imagination, we emphasized that christological belief and reflection about it, especially the kind that can provide the source and motivation for Christian commitment to socially transformative practices, is not just the act of the theologian or from his or her “fertile (re-) imagination”. The christological imagination or re-imagination is also something that cannot be reduced

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 288.

²⁴¹ For a convincing demonstration of similar point of view, see Diane Stinton, “Reconstruction Theology in Action: Exploring the Significance of Jesse N.K. Mugambi’s Theological Contribution through a Case Study of Nairobi Chapel/Mauvuno Church in Nairobi, Kenya,” 134-152.

to systematized and often sophisticated models. As Orobator insists: “we cannot repeat enough the idea that theological reflection originates not purely from the fertile (re-) imagination of the theologian but from within the community of believers.”²⁴² Theological reflection, he contends even further, constitutes a ‘second act’; and this “serves as a permanent corrective to any purely academic and subjective production of theology, no matter how ingenious.”²⁴³ For as we saw in the works of the two theologians of reconstruction we have discussed, Kä Mana and Victor Ezigbo, their methodological approach is lacking in precisely what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza rightly identifies as “a *hermeneutics* of transformative action for (social) change.”²⁴⁴ This hermeneutics is one that derives from plumbing the meaning and presenting the implications of a uniquely *incarnational* faith.

Mana and Ezigbo’s christological re-imagination (or reconstruction) for the transformation of African society come across as somewhat idealistic and individualistic. There is a certain ideological orientation that underlines their individual ambition to construct a christological “model”. In their thinking, they suppose that the appropriation and applicability of the ‘model’ which they claim to have successfully constructed would bring about transformative solutions to the real and often complex problems and challenges of Africans. This idea sounds overly oversimplified, “abstract, apodictic, and universalizing,” and, as a result, not yielding solutions that are very concrete, practical and realizable.²⁴⁵ Besides, it leaves one to keep wondering when will the construction of “models” come to a fruitful end, with every individual theologian trying to come up with his or her own model. I think here of another African theologian, Jakobus Vorster, who in his case for “a transforming Christology” in South Africa also proposes what he identifies as the “kingdom christological model.”²⁴⁶

While the approaches of the reconstruction Christologists may contain a number of key merits from a systematic theological point of view, the challenging experiences and complex realities in the African society cannot be easily responded to with one or another christological model that is ‘neatly’ created by theologians. It is my view that their proposal of models for re-imagining Christ and the Christian quest for social transformation, is somewhat shaped by a loss to *incarnational faith and reality*. In the final consideration, their proposals seem to be a retreat from the real context of the ongoing experience and expression of Christ in certain images of faith and hope in his personality and ministry. Their christological proposals instead have shifted the focus to come to rest within the rationally abstracted, or strictly epistemological interpretation of texts, kerygma, hermeneutics, and dialectic as the end point of christological engagement. This observation does not in any way intend to undercut the significance of these elements in the art of

²⁴² Orobator, “The Sky is Wide Enough,” 41.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 186. Emphasis mine. See also, Bongajalo Goba, *An Agenda for Black Theology: Hermeneutics for Social Change* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1988).

²⁴⁵ Ilo, “*Africae Munus* and the Challenges of a Transformative Missional Theological Praxis in Africa’s Social Context,” 116-117.

²⁴⁶ Vorster, “A Case for a Transforming Christology in South Africa.” He discusses this christological model under the heading “The Transforming Jesus,” 318-325.

christologizing, especially for social transformation in Africa. The point I wish to make is that to think of these as the end-stations for christological reflection and exchange in the concern for the transformation of societies in Africa is to lose the deeply essential relation of Christology to social transformation. Whereby the former (Christology) should receive further expression in terms its potential to: (1) foster an enhanced *relationship* of the Christian with Christ and with one another, (2) engage the Christian possibility to assume *agency* for their lives and the lives of others, and, therefrom, (3) mobilize the Christian capacity for the commitment to *practices* that will bring about the transformation of their societies.

I have explained in the preceding chapter that the experience and expression of Christ's identity and work in certain images are not "a fixed, static" performance. Christ himself "embodies a divine dynamism."²⁴⁷ Consequently, what is inescapably decisive for the process of social transformation is the experiences and voices of the Christians everywhere, particularly at the grassroots level. This very process of "narrating and reflecting together" through the lens of an option for and commitment to the transformation of Africans and their society expressed in the christological images of faith and hope in Christ is itself praxis where the Christians, majority of whom are poor, are treated not as passive sufferers, but as active subjects bringing forth transformation.²⁴⁸ Their construction or reimagination of Christ's identity and work in terms of prefabricated christological model doesn't seem to accommodate or open to this possibility. This is because their representation of Christ in the attempt to relate him to social realities, and, consequently, its transformation, proceed on a one-way doctrine of Christ (often from above, and mainly of the theologians themselves) down to a vision of societal transformation. Such ways of (re)imagining Christ for social transformation present a weak vision.

4. Beyond the Trends in the Quest for a Transformative Christology

From my study of the christological reflections on the images of Christ, in the three trends of contemporary African Christologies, it may be helpful at this point to highlight the following critical remarks. The critical points are not meant to undercut the enormous contributions of the representative thinkers of the trends. Rather, they provide an outline of why we should 'go beyond' the trends in the quest for a transformative Christology in Africa.

In the first place, the project of their christological re-imagination comes across often as too much a matter among scholars. Their christological re-imagination in relation to the issue of societal change in Africa, tends to thrust aside the vitality of the ordinary African Christians' experience and expression of Christ's identity and work, particularly at the grassroots.²⁴⁹ Consequently, the outcome of the scholars' christological vision is a very

²⁴⁷ Orobator, "The Sky is Wide Enough," 43.

²⁴⁸ I am indebted to Michael Cook for these ideas which he discusses in the concluding chapter of his book that examines "the Rejected Prophet" in the Mexican American Experience as a social-transformation image." See Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 176-201, at 184.

²⁴⁹ Noting pejorative or derogatory is intended in the use of the word ordinary. It only provides a possible distinction from those who are scholars in the field of the discipline by which the understanding of Jesus Christ is articulated.

individualised, top-down theological reflection on the meaning and significance of Christ and ‘Christ-Event’ for social transformation. Even in the outline of the ethical form (actions of everyday Christians) that emerges from the re-imagination of Christ’s life and mission, little attention is paid to how these insights could emerge from within grassroots Christian communities; or how the insights could be embodied and become enacted as praxis of social transformation by the Christians themselves, both from within and beyond the grassroots Christian communities. This could explain why little progress has been made in bringing the fruits of the scholars’ christological discussions to bear on the corresponding social realities, which most of the scholars claim inform their discussions. Therefore, as Kenneth Ross poignantly puts it:

“Such discussions can make little headway until we have clearer picture of ‘grassroots’ Christology, i.e. of how ordinary people understand the identity and meaning of Jesus Christ. For the life and worship of the people of God is always an important formative factor in theological reconstruction. It is a necessary source for the theological task required in Africa today.”²⁵⁰

Secondly, the project of re-imagining Christ in the works of the academic theologians we have engaged with, do not offer so much help as regards the enhancement of the African Christians’ capacity to assume agency in specific decision-making, and the enactment of the praxis of transformation. Their works provide only a hermetically closed theological description and interpretation of the images of Christ in relation to the social conditions of Africans. In their work, they fail to sufficiently underline how the identity and work of Christ, notably as imagined by Christians at the grassroots, are powerful resources for motivating and re-orienting Christians to become more involved in the work of social transformation. That is to say, their christological re-imagination do not offer implications for, nor does it indicate the programmatic ways Christians who proclaim and celebrate Christ as healer, liberator and king, ought to live and act as a concrete manifestation of the reign of God in Africa. In a word, their christological exercise fails to work out how we, as theologians and Christians, are to encourage human agents to adopt conscious voluntary social practices that flow from their christological experience and expressions of Christ in the images that are vibrant amongst people at the grassroots.

Thirdly, going beyond the trend requires us to think more on how to critically (re-) appropriate the christological norm that has been either used to diminish, or could be used to mobilize, the agency of the regular African Christian towards a mode of action that will have a transforming social impact in the context. Going beyond the trend as a uniquely, urgent christological undertaking in itself, entails more than just the re-presentation of Christ’s identity and work in language that arises from, and in turn, appeals to the African religious-cultural consciousness (Shorter and Manus). It also goes beyond the hailing of Christ as liberator and upholding the promises his identity as such bear for “the poor and marginalized rural-dwelling Africans” and women (Éla and Oduyoye). In addition, appropriating Christ for social transformation exceeds the exhortative, kerygmatic portrayal of his life, and the formulation of corresponding ethical or pastoral proposals

²⁵⁰ Ross, “Current Christological Trends,” 160.

therefrom (Mana). To be sure, it cannot be limited to an individualised prefabrication or construction of fine christological models (Ezigbo) for interrogating the dehumanizing social conditions of many Africans.

These remarks, as I mentioned, are not meant to detract from the undeniably valid proposals and truly laudable vision for societal transformation of many of the scholars we have examined here. In the light of the questions we raised at the beginning of this chapter, our authors proved their value for the current research agenda. At least, their Christologies are a serious engagement in the prime, and still, very urgent task of disclosing the true *image* of Jesus Christ as experienced and proclaimed according to the genius of African Christians.²⁵¹ A task, the scholars we examined, tried to really fulfil, thanks to the originality and perceptivity of most of their insights. It is obvious from our study that the theologians paid a relatively fair attention to the Christians' appropriation, understanding and expression of Christ in the light of their social context. Hence, there is no denying that their Christologies share the concern and the struggle for the transformation of society. Their Christologies are marked by the drive to make academic Christology speak to, and be responsible to, the lived Christology of many sick, suffering, and oppressed Africans, who are passionately longing for personal and societal change in terms healing, liberation, and social justice.

Yet, in so far as the critical question of how the (re-)imagination of Christ as healer, liberator, and king in African Christian and theological context can provide the source for engaging the agency of the Christians, and sustain motivation for committed discipleship (practices) that will have a more transforming social impact in Africa today is concerned, their christological reflections stand in need of being complemented. The task of this complementarity will have to do with a deeper probing of the christological norm that allows for a more robust and critical appropriation of the popular images of Christ in African Christian context. Hence, the urgency to move beyond the trend. And doing so will inevitably consist in engaging with, or as George de Schrijver drawing on Jon Sobrino's historical Christology puts it, "in assimilating the historical praxis that derives from the incarnate divinity of Christ as a potent (mystagogic) means to make believers" not only to understand, but become committed to Jesus' divine mission."²⁵² As such, what is required is a more dynamic theological reflection that speaks of and speaks to the African Christians' personal and living *relationship with Christ*; that highlights the possibility of this relationship for the *empowerment of their human agency*; and that formulates the concrete implications in terms of daily *practices that could be enacted*. In other words, there is need for a theological reflection that articulates the nature, the dynamics and consequences of this embodied relationship, and empowered agency, for a reinforced sense of Christian vocation and responsibility that are aimed at the transformation of lives and society. Such a reflection, which is in line with the basic mode of Christ's own existence and Christians' own life in Christ, is what I shall pursue in the next two chapters (3 and 4) of this dissertation.

²⁵¹ Cited in Stinton, "Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology," 288.

²⁵² De Schrijver, "Christology from the Underside of History: The Case of Jon Sobrino," 495.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have investigated the reflections of six African theologians on the popular images of Christ – healer, liberator and king. The investigation was carried out under the commonly designated three trends in contemporary African Christology – inculturation (Aylward Shorter and Ukachukwu Chris Manus), liberation (Jean-Marc Éla and Mercy Amba Oduyoye), and reconstruction (Kä Mana and Victor Ezigbo). These theologians acknowledge that Jesus Christ, and faith in him, is the ground, centre and apex of social transformation in Africa. I outlined how these authors, in various distinctive ways, worked out this basic insight in their inculturationist, liberationist, and reconstructionist attempts. To do so, I critically examined many of their key presuppositions, the sources and method in play, their chosen categories and overall framework, the main lines of their argumentation, and many of the essential conclusions. From all indications, it was obvious that the goal of these African Christologists, and many others whose works I have only mentioned in passing, was to bring the results of their christological inventiveness and re-imagination to bear on the issue of social transformation in Africa.

However, in response to the question raised at the beginning of the chapter, I argued that, first, in their christological reflections on these images, they pay insufficient attention to how the images of Christ function and could be taken to function, particularly, within the grassroots Christian communities. Second, I also maintained that in most of their insights they have not been able to distil the transformative potentials in these images as such. This is because their christological ideas do not show how the images can be re-appropriated and adopted in order to foster the Christian commitment that will bring about the transformation of societies in Africa, still from within the grassroots Christian communities. More specifically, I argued that their christological proposals are still overly individualized, elitist and exclusive. Their reflections come forth mainly as simple transposition of the figure and work of Christ (often as presented in the Gospels) into the social realities of many Africans, Christians or non-Christians. As such, their appropriation of the images of Christ do not receive robust and concrete translations for enhancing the Christians' *relationship* with Christ, for enabling them to assume *agency* for their lives and for others, and for enacting the *praxis* that can bring about social change. These observations are made bearing in mind the hypothesis undergirding this research: In-depth analysis reveals that critical issues like preventable and curable illnesses, unbearable poverty, and social injustice, in the social context of Africa, prompt particular images of Christ, especially in the grassroots Christian communities. "As these christological images are adopted in contemporary Christian praxis, they serve to redress the very issues that prompted their formulation."²⁵³

And to this point, the question still remains: which christological scheme will help us enter into a more critical engagement and appropriation of the identity and work of Christ expressed in those images we have been examining both in the first and in this second chapter? In other words, how are we able to draw from these images resources which can sustain the motivation for Christian commitment to practices that will have a more

²⁵³ Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, 251.

transforming social impact in Africa? What could be this christological scheme or norm that will offer a more robust affirmation of, and allow for a more critical appropriation of the popular images of Christ that we have been examining so far in this study? To where can one look in order to find this scheme? And if there is, and if it is found, how can it be employed for the task of engaging Christians for social transformation in the African context? These questions inform the exploration that is embarked upon in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

APPROPRIATING CHRIST FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: DIALOGUE WITH JON SOBRINO'S HISTORICAL CHRISTOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

In chapter one I offered a constructive-theological analysis of the images of Christ as healer, liberator, and king in relation to the quest for social transformation, within the contemporary grassroots Christian communities of Africa. I argued that the images bear a potential for social transformation if they are more critically appropriated. In chapter two, I examined how various theologians, reflecting from the African social situation, have tried to disclose the potential, though not sufficiently, in their representation of the christological images and their significance for Christian commitment to the transformation of society in Africa.

In this third chapter, I will explain how Jon Sobrino, in his historical Christology, analyses the reality (meaning and significance) of Jesus Christ, whom he identifies as liberator, which is a popular image also in African Christianity. This is in view of my own broader task of critically appropriating Christ's person and work towards a mode of christological disposition (understanding and loving), being, and acting among Christians, that will bring about the transformation of societies in Africa.¹ In other words, it is my hope that Sobrino's historical Christology can be the prism for entering into comprehensive, critical dialogue with African popular and academic Christologies, and for developing a social transformation-oriented Christology in and for this context.

My dialogue with Jon Sobrino's historical Christology will proceed in five steps. I will first explain the motivation for choosing Jon Sobrino, a Latin American theologian, in the task of critically appropriating the images of Christ for social transformation in another (African) context. In the second section, I will give a brief biographical account of Sobrino. I will introduce the social context of his historical Christology, underline some of the major influences in its development, and situate his historical christological project within a wider theological and ecclesiological discourse. This second section is not meant as a fully comprehensive guide to Sobrino's theology or ecclesiology – an impossible task due to the particular scope of this study and Sobrino's extensive publications and wide range of his ideas.² Moreover, as bears repeating, the present research is *not* a work on Jon Sobrino's

¹ Jon Sobrino, building on Ignacio Ellacuría's philosophical construction of a threefold moment in engaging reality, talks about the necessary "disposition". He describes disposition as the spirit that every human person is capable of embodying, and should live out in his or her daily life, towards "the proper (comprehensive and transformative) engagement of historical reality." See Jon Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 677-701; and as discussed in O. Ernesto Valiente, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013): 655-682, at 660, 661.

² A number of works offer an excellent introductory overview of Sobrino's life and works. See, for example: Robert Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink: Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and the Jesuit Martyrs of the University of Central America* (Maryknoll, NY: 2014); Robert Lassalle-Klein, ed., *Jon Sobrino: Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: 2018); Ernesto Valiente, *Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino's*

Christology as such, as I have already stated in the general introduction to this dissertation.³ Nevertheless, because of the limited knowledge and often flawed understanding in the reception (if ever there is any) of Sobrino's Christology, particularly in the African context, and for the purpose of engaging some of his ideas in research that is located primarily within the field of African Christologies, it is vital that I introduce him and the contours of his Christology at some length. In so doing, I try to delineate the line of integrity, orthodoxy, and relevance of Sobrino's christological thinking, as well as my creative redeployment of it.⁴

Then, in the third section, I will discuss considerably the historical Christology of Sobrino, the main resource for a more critical appropriation of Christ's identity and work, in our ongoing interrogation of the African Christologies in relation to the quest for social transformation in the context. The discussion in the section will be done in two parts. In the fourth section, I will draw out the consequences of Jon Sobrino's historical Christology for exploring the connection between Christ (faith in him) and social transformation. After doing so, in the fifth section, I offer a critical evaluation of Sobrino's christological ideas as regards his concern and vision, too, for "the transformation of society as such."⁵ Throughout my presentation, I bear in mind the strengths and limitations which we have identified in our discussion in the preceding two chapters, of the meaning and actual operation of the images of Christ as healer, liberator and king in the grassroots and constructive Christologies, respectively, and in view of the discussion we shall carry on into the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation.

1. A Turn to Jon Sobrino's Christology

1.1. Why Jon Sobrino?

How can the work of a theologian from the Latin American context, one whose christological corpora were mostly written out of and in response to that particular context, and in a particular time, be engaged within a study that focuses on the African context in the here and now? This question brings me to clarify the rationale for the choice of Jon Sobrino and his historical Christology in the present research. In fact, such a question is all

Christological Spirituality (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016). Few important and recent collections of essays and articles introducing Sobrino's works are: Stephen J. Pope, ed., *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); Gerard Mannion, "Jon Sobrino's Enduring Contribution to Christian Theology and Its Reception," *Ecclesiology* 8 (2012):71-80; Todd Walatka, "Uniting Spirituality and Theology: Jon Sobrino's Seeking Honesty with the Real," *Spiritus* 13 (2013): 76-99; Todd Walatka, "The Principle of Mercy: Jon Sobrino and the Catholic Theological Tradition," *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 96-117.

³ It is on page 14.

⁴ Todd Walatka has argued, and shown with the theme of mercy in Sobrino's theological project, that his "insights should be seen as a development of, not rupture with, the Catholic theological tradition." See Walatka, "The Principle of Mercy: Jon Sobrino and the Catholic Theological Tradition," 98. Specifically, "on the orthodox character of Sobrino's Christology," see Georges de Schrijver, "De orthodoxie van de bevrijdingstheologie," *Streven* 51 (1983-1984): 771-784. De Schrijver offers an English re-presentation of this article in the first part of his essay, "Christology from the Underside of History: The Case of Jon Sobrino," in *The Myriad Christ*, ed. T. Merrigan and J. Haers, 493-506.

⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 161.

the more fundamental, and a response to it is all the more necessary. This is because of the current compelling sensitivity to the subject of “context” or the specifics of a particular location in theological discourse.⁶ Associated with this sensitivity to context (understood as the particular human experience of a person and his or her social location) is the critical attention to the voices that are listened to, the sources that are engaged with, the approaches adopted, and the methods employed in the task of theological reflection within a particular time and place. Some of these issues surrounding the question formulated above, as they concern the sources and method of Jon Sobrino in particular, have been grappled with by scholars, particularly within the field of decolonial studies. Let me touch on them very briefly here.

In decolonial studies, there has been a critique of the Eurocentrism – the dominance of Western sources, method, and categories – of Christian (liberation) theology.⁷ In this light, decolonial theorists also suggest that Latin American liberation theologians – people like Jon Sobrino (our chosen author), Clodovis Boff, and Ignacio Ellacuría – rely heavily on European sources.⁸ Thus, Jon Sobrino’s theology, as many of the theologies of his Latin American counterparts, are heavily criticized for their “Eurocentric epistemological frameworks.”⁹ Without glossing over the criticism, it is still beyond the scope of the present research to enter into a detailed response. There is no doubt that Sobrino’s theology is influenced by European (German) thinkers like Karl Rahner and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I shall say more about this in the second section of this chapter.

However, Joseph Drexler-Dreis has demonstrated that Sobrino, in his historical Christology, transcends and even moves towards the undoing of the Eurocentricity of (his) epistemology and sources.¹⁰ According to Drexler-Dreis, Sobrino succeeds in doing that by constructing a theological approach, a theological way of thinking, which allows the experiences of the ordinary people – grassroots communities, or whom Sobrino, following Ignacio Ellacuría, calls the “crucified people” – to inform his christological reflections.¹¹ The result is that in Sobrino’s Christology, according to Drexler-Dreis, “the social-theological setting of the world of the poor” is the primary source – and not the European sources or the “Eurocentric framework” – for his (Sobrino’s) understanding and appropriation of the reality of Christ and the reign of God he came to inaugurate.¹² Sobrino himself says that,

⁶ See Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, revised and expanded edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). Bevans identifies “context”, and argues throughout the work that, it is the third *locus theologicus*, with scripture and tradition as the first two *loci*.

⁷ For a recent study and excellent contribution to the debate, see Joseph Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2019), 49-69. See also Joseph Drexler-Dreis, “Latin American Liberation Theology as a Decolonial Project?: Considering the Theological Approaches of Clodovis Boff and Ignacio Ellacuría,” *Louvain Studies* 39 (2015-16): 218-239. I refer to the subject as discussed in these works by Drexler-Dreis.

⁸ Drexler-Dreis, “Latin American Liberation Theology as a Decolonial Project?,” 220-222, at 238.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹¹ Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love*, 66-69; “Latin American Liberation Theology as a Decolonial Project?,” 238. As a matter of fact, the subtitle of the second volume of Sobrino’s historical Christology is “A View from the Victims.” See his initial thoughts about it in *Christ the Liberator*, 3-8.

¹² Drexler-Dreis, “Latin American Liberation Theology as a Decolonial Project?,” 238.

“The view of the victims helps to read christological texts and to know Jesus Christ better. Furthermore, this Jesus Christ, known in this way, helps us to understand the victims better and, above all, to work to defend them. A God and a Christ partial to them make theology be done “upholding the victims,” which determines the *relevance* of christology in today’s world. And it also introduces the poor and the victims into the “theological” ambit, not merely the ethical one, which determines the *identity* of theology.¹³

In addition to this point of view, in the light of our methodological orientation (a critical and a certain sympathetic reading of relevant sources), I have chosen in this present research to foster a kind of theological solidarity, a solidarity that is urgently needed even in theological conversations that have become radically divided and polarized, sometimes along the lines of “context.” By this theological solidarity, I refer to an openness to learning from any scholar, no matter the context, much as Sobrino, who to my mind helps in appropriating more critically the meaning and significance of Christ’s personality in relation to “*the transformation brought about by him.*”¹⁴ Sobrino underlines the fact, and it is a very important one to note, that the correlative of (his) Christology, particularly within the framework of Jesus’ life in terms of (1) his relationship with the Father and other people, (2) the exercise of his ongoing agency, and (3) his “praxis with spirit,” is to seek and be committed to “the transformation of society as such.”¹⁵ Hence, the necessity and legitimacy of the theological solidarity, also derives from the common “faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ,” the object of every authentic Christology and christologizing, including Sobrino’s.

Moreover, not to avail oneself of what other Christians and theologians have said elsewhere and at other times about Jesus Christ, and the meaning of his identity and work for their own context, risks stifling what faith in Christ as a whole is all about. As Kathryn Tanner rightly argues, “knowledge of Christianity (and unmistakably, of Christ) in other times and places is a way, then, of expanding the range of imaginative possibilities for theological construction in any one time and place, a way of expanding the resources with which one can work.”¹⁶ Therefore, a sense of this theological solidarity, that is, placing one’s own effort within the ongoing and wider christological stream, as Tanner puts it, allows for a fruitful engagement with the sources of Sobrino’s historical Christology beyond my own specific context of African Christianity and applications to Christology.¹⁷

In other words, it is my intention in the present research to sustain a disposition of theological receptivity to the reflections of scholars whose particular experiences and struggles I relate to, given the shared experiences and the struggles of my fellow Africans, the majority of whom are poor, suffering, and marginalized. As such, the lessons drawn from the Latin American liberation theology would be useful for the overall purpose of the present study. In this way, I also pursue what could safely be considered an example of

¹³ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 8. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 161. See also Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino,” 657.

¹⁶ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, xviii.

¹⁷ For a similar line of argumentation see Dean Brackley, “Theology and Solidarity: Learning from Sobrino’s Method,” in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope, 3-15.

“intercontextual” Christology.¹⁸ There is no denying that this element of cross-cultural and contextual christologizing enhances the value and originality of my pursuit of a socially transformative Christology. In pursuing this line of thought, I aim to fill a lacuna in the present state of research on liberation theology. I do not think much scholarship has appeared, if any, in the comparative study of Latin American and African theologies of liberation.¹⁹ I do not intend to sound overly personal in what I have said so far about my choice of entering into dialogue with an author from another social-theological context. So, in what follows, I will provide a more constructive systematic-theological rationale for the choice of Jon Sobrino, a Latin American theologian, in a work that focuses on the African context. I will do this by referring mainly to: (i) Sobrino’s own christological works; (ii) secondary sources on his Christology; and (iii) primary and secondary sources of his theology as a whole.

By way of recapitulating what I have briefly presented above – and will have to return to at greater length in a moment – there are three main reasons why Sobrino’s Christology is relevant for a work on Christology within the African context. First, there is a similarity between the respective socio-economic and political contexts of Latin America and Africa, which informs the necessity of looking at and learning from a contextualized, socially transformative Christology like Sobrino’s. Second, the similarity of context²⁰ provides a useful terrain that allows for the incorporation of a robust christological scheme for critiquing and expanding the Christologies of social transformation. Third, Latin American liberation theology has a long tradition of christological analysis rooted in praxis, which “broadly refers to a way of life that seeks to transform society in light of Christian revelation and Christian faith (in the life and work of Jesus Christ).”²¹ In the light of these reasons, I shall now elucidate further the rationale for choosing Jon Sobrino by means of three trails within the contours of the present research.

¹⁸ See Volker Küster, “Christology in a Diversity of Context,” in *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, 37-178. Küster argues that context can relate with each other. And so, in view of repristinating the context of Africa, it is reasonable and legitimate to engage the African context with other contexts, in this case, Latin American context.

¹⁹ A step was taken in this direction in the context of the present research. I had the privilege, great thanks to my promoter, Stephan van Erp, of co-initiating, organizing, and participating in a series of seminars and lectures under the theme, “Theology of Liberation in the African Context,” at the Leuven Centre for Liberation Theologies, 2017-2018, https://theo.kuleuven.be/en/research/centres/centr_lib/theology-of-liberation-african-context [accessed January 10, 2020].

²⁰ For a recent study that explores, though in broad strokes, the relationship between the Latin American and African contexts, see some of the essays in Justin Sands and Anné Hendrik Verhoef, eds., *Transforming Encounters and Critical Reflection: African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology in Dialogue* (Basel: MDPI, 2018).

²¹ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 8. Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino,” 657.

1.2. Justification of the Choice

1.2.1. Significance in the wider Theological, Ecclesial, and Social Setting

Jon Sobrino refers to the historical reality of Christ and the concrete realities of the poor as “the ecclesial and social” starting point of his historical Christology.²² For Sobrino, any embracing account of Jesus’s personality must prioritize his historicity, and every historical, “real situation” that is analogous to or corresponds with Jesus’ own.²³ Sobrino insists that this idea is in line with the christological inseparability of the identity and mission of Jesus.²⁴ Thus, in Sobrino’s Christology, the historical reality of Jesus and Jesus’ prophetic challenge to the social order are given prime and serious attention. By this fact, Sobrino claims his historical Christology, though a distinctively “contextualized” Christology, is inspired by older Christologies, as I shall present later. His Christology, he avers, can and does inspire other future Christologies.²⁵ The point is that there is a line of continuity traceable in Sobrino’s Christology.

In speaking about Jon Sobrino’s enduring contribution to, and significance for, Christian theology, Gerard Mannion has remarked that “the work of Sobrino has a much wider relevance for and resonance with the majority of the Christian world.”²⁶ He described Sobrino’s *Christology at the Crossroads*, for example, as “a modern theological classic through which an entire generation of theologians encountered (and encounters) a new way of doing theology.”²⁷ Sobrino himself maintained that his Christology “is essential for both theology and faith,” because it “introduces the poor and the victims into the *theological* ambit, which determines and amplifies the *identity* of theology.”²⁸ What precisely constitutes this identity? For Sobrino, it is the uniqueness of theology and, no less, of Christology, as “*intellectus amoris*” and I add, *opus amoris*, which the theological exercise urgently demands in today’s world.²⁹ This is how he expresses the argument:

“In keeping the victims central to theology, I am seeking to be honest to reality and responsible for it. I want to challenge Christians, theologians, and all human beings to be those who bring good news: God and his Christ are present in our world, and not just anywhere but where they said they would be – in the poor and the victims of this world. In this way, I think, one can do theology, and christology, as *intellectus amoris* – the work of liberating victims – and as *intellectus gratiae* – from the grace that has been given us in them.”³⁰

²² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 23-24, 27-28.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.* See also Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Christ and Kingdom: The Identity of Jesus and Christian Politics,” in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope, 242-254.

²⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 23-35.

²⁶ Mannion, “Jon Sobrino’s Enduring Contribution to Christian Theology,” 79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁸ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 8. Emphasis in the original.

²⁹ Jon Sobrino, “Theology in a Suffering World: Theology as *Intellectus Amoris*,” in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 27-48. This essay was originally published in *Pluralism and Oppression: Theology in World Perspective*, ed. Paul Knitter, College Theological Society 34 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 153-187.

³⁰ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 8, 3; *idem*, *Jesus the Liberator*, 62-63. Precisely in *Christ the Liberator*, Sobrino makes the claim that his Christology, which examines the reality of Jesus Christ in relation to and in

Drawing upon these insights of Sobrino, Lassalle-Klein remarks that the historical Christology of Jon Sobrino forms what he believes is “the most fully developed contextual theology written since Vatican II.”³¹ He refers to Sobrino’s Christology as “a distinctively contextualized Christology that gives voice to the faith, hope, and love...of the poor.”³² In an essay already cited, Lassalle-Klein concludes that Sobrino’s historical Christology contains “key elements (some of which I shall delineate in this chapter) that contribute to the development of fundamental and christological contextual theologies that are emerging around the globe.”³³ Such a characterization is due to “the substance and the methods informing the *analogatum principis* drawn by Jon Sobrino between the historical reality of Jesus Christ and the “crucified peoples” of our world,” wherever they may be.³⁴ Gerald O’Collins also corroborates this aspect of the wider relevance of Sobrino’s historical Christology, referring to the four main christological corpora of Sobrino. O’Collins writes:

“From *Christology at the Crossroads* and *Jesus in Latin America* down to a book dedicated to eight murdered friends, *Jesus the Liberator* and beyond (that includes the second volume, *Christ the Liberator*), Sobrino has proved in Christology the leading voice of liberation theology. Viewing from the standpoint of the victims who Christ is and what he does, Sobrino calls for *transformation of society* and a life of service based on the ideals of justice, peace, human solidarity. Such liberation Christology embodies a spirituality of active discipleship.”³⁵

From this point of view, some authors have also underlined the significance of Sobrino’s Christology for contexts beyond Latin America. For example, George de Schrijver notes that Sobrino developed a fundamental christological perspective that allows for the classical Chalcedonian christological formulae to emerge from confrontations within historical realities and ordinary experiences of people in El Salvador and

the light of the realities of human existence “may be useful to all human beings, not only to believers.” He, however, nuances this view by saying that, “the Christian scheme formulates ultimate questions and gives them a specific response, which, of course, does not have to be accepted by everyone. But can help to formulate the questions common to everyone: what to hope for, what to do with the cross, what to celebrate.” *Christ the Liberator*, 3.

³¹ Robert Lassalle-Klein, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People: The Contextual Christology of Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 347-376, at 347. See also Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 285-336; Lassalle-Klein, ed., *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); and Sobrino’s contribution in the volume, “Jesus’ Approach as a Paradigm for Mission,” 85-98.

³² Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 285.

³³ Lassalle-Klein, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People,” 376.

³⁴ Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 287, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People,” 376. Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 4.

³⁵ O’Collins, “Developments in Christology,” 165. Italics in the original. Emphasis mine. See also Gerald O’Collins, “Christology—The Last Fifty Years,” in *Christology: Origins, Developments, Debates*, 8; and Sean Salai, “Jesus has been ‘the constant companion of my life’: Interview with Gerald O’Collins,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, December 2, 2015, <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/catholic-theology-today-30-questions-gerald-ocollins-sj> [accessed August 26, 2019]. In the interview, O’Collins vividly appreciates the Christology of Jon Sobrino. According to O’Collins, Sobrino’s Christology is one of the three welcome developments in Christology because it presses the cause of transforming society. He asserts further that Sobrino’s Christology forms part of the lessons and graces he (O’Collins) draws from recent debates in Christology, and in what O’Collins, in another place, refers to as the “second style of theology.” See Gerald O’Collins, “Theological Styles and Methods,” in *Rethinking Fundamental Theology: Toward a New Fundamental Theology*, 324.

elsewhere.³⁶ This is explicit, for instance, in his *Christ the Liberator* (2001). In it, Sobrino laments somewhat at length about the “victims, poverty, indifference, and hypocrisy in our world,” drawing upon the heart-rending 1996 report of the United Nations Development Program.³⁷ Quite interestingly, Sobrino laments and decries particularly “the exploitation of Africa.”³⁸ In fact, he had put it so pointedly when asked what it means to do liberation theology in today’s world, with whom and with what should theologians who strive to be liberation theologians connect to. To this he responds: “In the first place, it is necessary to see, touch, smell the reality of Africa....It is necessary to be open to that which shakes and changes people.”³⁹ In this way, Sobrino positions his historical Christology as a form of his own solidarity not only with the Latin American context, but also within other contexts where there is the experience of social deprivation.

Thus, by analysing the core christological concepts in the light of those, who in life, have to put up with very challenging social realities, Sobrino provides a way to account for the identity of Christ that pushes beyond the classical western theological matrix.⁴⁰ From this perspective, his historical Christology offers a paradigmatic value in the present research that explores the theological-practical connection between belief in Jesus Christ and the transformation of society. And this brings me to another, more directed line of reasoning for the appeal to a Latin American thinker in a work on African Christology.

1.2.2. *Within the Economy of the Present Research*

In the last two chapters, I paid a critical attention to the dominant (grassroots and academic) Christologies towards disclosing their socially transformative potential by the way of distilling the helpful, and critiquing the not-so helpful elements. This comes very close to what Sobrino does in his main christological works.⁴¹ For instance, in his book *Jesus the Liberator* (1993), he speaks of “useful and harmful” Christologies.⁴² According to Sobrino, the *useful* Christologies must be actively re-appropriated. For they always present and should re-present Christ “in a manner that is beneficial to the faith of believers, to the life of the church, and to the configuration of history.”⁴³ By the configuration of history, Sobrino means precisely the transformation of the social order towards the promotion of

³⁶ De Schrijver, “Christology from the Underside of History: The Case of Jon Sobrino,” 508. See also John Meier’s praise of Sobrino’s Christology, which according to Meier is a remarkable move “to make academic theology speak to and be responsible to the lived Christianity of a suffering people yearning for liberation from political, social, and economic enslavement.” John Meier, “The Bible as a Source for Theology,” in *The Catholic Theological Society of America*, Proceedings of the Forty-Third Annual Convention, Toronto, Ontario, June 15-18, 1988, vol. 43 (1988), 2.

³⁷ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 4-5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁹ See Joseph Drexler-Dreis, “Interview with Jon Sobrino,” *Newsletter CLT* 6 (September 2013). https://theo.kuleuven.be/en/research/centres/centr_lib/interview-with-jon-sobrino.pdf [accessed May 15, 2019], 3.

⁴⁰ De Schrijver, “Christology from the Underside of History: The Case of Jon Sobrino,” 493-519. See also Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love*, 65.

⁴¹ See the four main works mentioned in the quote from Gerald O’Collins in footnote reference no. 35, *supra*.

⁴² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 2-3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2. See also Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 677-701.

the well-being of its people.⁴⁴ The latter, that is, the “objectively harmful Christologies,” as Sobrino names them, which are pressed to serve dehumanizing situations, wittingly or unwittingly, and which do not provide any prophetic practice, must be “exposed” and subjected to scrutiny.⁴⁵ To learn from how Sobrino engages in the process of appropriating the “useful,” and scrutinizing the “harmful” Christologies, in view of a liberative or socially transformative christological spirituality – that rethinks and re-orient beliefs, attitudes, and actions in the African context – is a prime and essential motivation for my choice of his work.

Moreover, in the first chapter of this dissertation, I discussed the dynamics and significance of this twofold process: scrutinization and appropriation. There, while describing grassroots Christologies, I drew on Michael Cook’s idea of repristination and conscientization of (grassroots) Christologies as “the conditions for the possibility of a transforming christological faith and praxis within the African social context.”⁴⁶ The insights I garnered from the discussion in that first chapter substantiates why the choice of Jon Sobrino is a good one in the present research. Let me offer a quick recapitulation of the main ideas from the discussion. Michael Cook argues that “repristination” (or what he also calls “indigenization”) and “conscientization” consist in the critical-creative task of listening to, scrutinizing and integrating “the voice of Christ” that still resounds in the concretely lived experience and faith of those at the grassroots.⁴⁷ Interestingly, for the development of this reasoning and for his own of repristination of grassroots Christologies, Cook relies on a previously advanced argument, in which he draws largely on the methodological pointers and insights from Jon Sobrino’s Christologies, in order to respond to the question, “which kind of ‘Christ’ are currently being invoked in Latin America?”⁴⁸ And which kind of ‘Christ’ should be invoked? Similar questions informed my decision here to begin the present research by providing a constructive-theological account of the grassroots Christologies in chapter one. And in the chapter we saw that the kind of ‘Christ’ currently being invoked in African Christianity is one who will heal, liberate, and serve the cause of the Christians, as a demonstration of his divine identity and power.

Attention must also be directed to three pointers which are vital in the way Sobrino himself engages in scrutinizing and appropriating images of Christ. The pointer are: (1) his focus on the social context, what he describes as “the historical reality” or, “the social-theological reality”, (2) his attention to the voices of faith and hope of the people at the grassroots, and (3) the praxeological orientation of his process of discerning and responding to the meaning and significance of Christ’s identity and work in the social situation. Taking these into serious account also provides the motivation for my choice of his historical Christology in the social and theological engagement with the African grassroots and

⁴⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 161.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3. See also Jon Sobrino, “Presuppositions and Foundations of Spirituality,” in *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 13. In the work, Sobrino rejects those spiritualities (owing to certain christological beliefs) that isolate the human person from the demands of his or her social-historical realities. See also as mentioned in Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino,” 659.

⁴⁶ See the subsection 1.1 “Why Beginning at the Grassroots?,” in chapter one, at pages 26-27.

⁴⁷ See Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 672; *idem*, *Christology as a Narrative Quest*, 179-182.

⁴⁸ Cook, “Jesus from the Other Side of History,” 258-287, at 271-275.

academic Christologies. Michael Cook highlights the theological correspondence of these pointers when he comments that Jon Sobrino's Christology is:

“(...) ecclesial (the ongoing historical experience of Christian communities which Christ has continually unleashed), historical (the grounding of all Christologies in the history of Jesus), and trinitarian (theologizing itself as trinitarian process in the concrete praxis of following Jesus, who reveals the Son as the way to the Father...and as the core of the reign of God). This new direction is most clearly seen in the priority given to the praxis of following Jesus in announcing and seeking to embody and enact the kingdom in real life.”⁴⁹

These three elements of Sobrino's Christology – ecclesial, historical and theological – provide the direction in my pursuit of a transformative Christology in the African context. In other words, a transformative Christology for and in the African social and ecclesial context must be inclusive of these three elements. Consider, for example, the ecclesial (social) character of Sobrino's historical Christology. It offers the hermeneutical lens for critiquing and calling Christian faith away from an approach which allows a definition of salvation merely in terms of individualized, inner life – a limitation we pointed out in our examination of the grassroots Christologies in the first chapter. Another example could be gleaned from the historical (concrete) character of his Christology. The appeal to the historical challenges an understanding of Christ “in an abstract way that is open to ideological distortion by those who have a stake in oppression.”⁵⁰ I discussed this point in chapter two, in my critical evaluation of the inculturationist christological re-imagination, particularly of the image of Christ as king.

I should allude to a third instance, that is, another form of reasoning in Sobrino's historical Christology that situates his thought within the economy of the present research, thereby explaining further the relevance and impact, and so, my choice of his Christology. It is found within the context of his initial reflections on the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ, and in his emphasis on the reign (Kingdom) of God. I will say something about both of these. On the subject of faith in Jesus Christ, in what sounds a little epigrammatic, Sobrino makes the interesting point that “faith in Jesus Christ is more than faith in him.”⁵¹ Referring to the New Testament and the conciliar texts, Sobrino says that witnessing to or speaking of the reality of Jesus Christ locates, or rather should rightly place, Christians and those who reflect on this reality, “in a *relationship* with a host of realities.”⁵² The dynamic of this imperative means that to proclaim faith in Christ or to offer an interpretation of the experience of faith in him, does not simply mean confessing or adopting a view of his

⁴⁹ Ibid., 271. In the preface to the English edition of his *Christology at the Crossroads*, Sobrino himself delineates the ecclesial, historical, and theological character and significance of his christology, and in order to solicit for a more constructive engagement with it. In one line he clearly states: “I should like to spell out the basic intention that has guided the elaboration of this book, for that may help people to read and criticize it more fruitfully.” And he maintains that, “the Christology presented in this book is meant to be ecclesial, historical, and trinitarian.” Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), xx. See also De Schrijver's analysis of these in his “Christology from the Underside of History: The Case of Jon Sobrino,” 494.

⁵⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 3.

⁵¹ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 3.

⁵² Ibid., 2. Emphasis mine.

reality. The faith of Jesus and faith in Jesus comes to light precisely in his relationship to the Father, on the one hand, and in the Christian's relationship to Christ, on the other. To Sobrino, this understanding demands "adopting a view (in the light of Christ) on reality as a whole."⁵³ Reading from Mark's Gospel, Sobrino comments, "the first Christians had realized that pure faith in Christ was not enough to meet the fundamental crisis...faced by the communities."⁵⁴ Continuing, further he remarks that, "it was not enough to confess Christ; it was necessary to refer back to the *reality* of Jesus,"⁵⁵ and to do so always, as a person to enter into relationship with.⁵⁶ By this *relationship* with Christ, one becomes an *empowered* human agent, and is able to *respond* (as Jesus did in actions) to the demands of his or her precise historical situation.⁵⁷

To spell out the point further, Sobrino appropriates the image of Christ as Lord, an interpretative move which could also be made with the images of Christ as healer, liberator, and king. It may be good to listen somewhat at length to Sobrino on this score, with comments enclosed in brackets drawing attention to areas of convergence between his research agenda and my own.

"Faith accepts Christ as such, and theology explains what this lordship implies. But in accepting Christ as Lord, believers also adopt a view on a whole constellation of realities beyond the reality of Christ. They should recognize, for example, that it is possible to live with freedom and hope in history, since the dominations and powers have already been vanquished, but also with the humility of seeing that God is not yet all in all and with the honesty of an open mind on the question of...how to reconcile the Lordship or Kingship of Christ with the suffering of this world. They accept that Christ has to be recognized as Lord in the liturgy, but they must take into serious account that in history, Christ's work of service, abasement, crucifixion has to be reproduced...That persons and communities have to be configured or transformed according to the reality of the Son. That Christ-the-head has left his embodiment in history, in our world, and so, his lordship, in our hands."⁵⁸

These ideas of Sobrino capture and undergird the basic task and trajectory of the present research, which are pursued in my consideration of the socially transformative reality and prophetic potential of christological belief in Africa. To investigate the christological scheme that enables Sobrino to work out this understanding of the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ and its significance for the Christian commitment to societal transformation, and for the work of Christology in Africa and elsewhere, is the goal of the present chapter and the one that follows within the overall economy of this project.

Regarding the emphasis on the Kingdom of God, Sobrino argues that, "the reign of God – as integral wellbeing, justice, and life in freedom together – is the core of Jesus of Nazareth."⁵⁹ This formulation incorporates, or rather makes responsibility for the

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 59.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ This idea is central in Sobrino's christological works and in his vision for the transformation of society. He presents the idea in such brevity in an interview he granted to the Joe Drexler-Dreis some six years ago. Drexler-Dreis, "Interview with Jon Sobrino," 1.

transformation of society the inner necessity for personal and communal redemption. This insight is latent and thus not articulated adequately in the confession and interpretation of Christ as king, for instance, in the African Christian and theological context, as we saw in the preceding chapters. As I have argued, the kingship of Christ, which a majority of African Christians believe in and proclaim with ample biblical support, evidenced also by reflections of professional theologians, ought to be seen in light of Jesus's relationship of humble obedience to the Father; and this obedience presents itself as an act, the praxis of a life that is spent kenotically in self-emptying service to all people.⁶⁰ Given these intimations, it follows that Jon Sobrino's historical Christology is a credible resource within the economy and for the goal of this project.

1.2.3. *In Search of a Christological Model*

The third and final, very important reason for my choice of Jon Sobrino is in the line of one of the research questions that the present thesis seeks to answer: How – and with what christological model – can the images of Christ proclaimed in sub-Saharan African context be more critically appropriated in order to provide the resources of faith that could transform and (re)orient Christians to become better committed to practices that will bring about social change? A modest effort at finding an answer to this question necessitates that we take a look at, undoubtedly, a highly developed and sustained systematic christological reflection on Jesus Christ and the implications of faith in him for societal transformation.⁶¹ Jon Sobrino's reflection on the image of Jesus Christ as liberator would be helpful in this regard. His work will offer an answer to the question of which christological scheme or model does allow for a more critical appropriation of the identity and work of Christ as healer, liberator, and king (in terms of embodied divine and human relationality, engaged agency, and enacted praxis). Sobrino's Christology might also help in answering the question: What are the implications of the christological model for connecting Christ and the Christians to social transformation?

This brings me to mention that Sobrino's Christology emphasizes the norm of the "incarnate divinity" of the historical reality of Christ. What this means and how it functions within Sobrino's historical Christology is part of what the present research seeks to explore. I should add, for now, that Jon Sobrino's use of this model of Christ's existence is animated by his desire to make room for the humanity of Christ without losing sight of his divinity. For he was passionate to reflect and speak about Jesus Christ in such a way that ordinary persons could understand, relate to, and most importantly, follow and act therefrom in their

⁶⁰ For my understanding of Jesus' kingship as kenosis, and my articulation of the insight as such here, I am indebted to Hans Urs von Balthasar, particularly his reflection on the life of Jesus, his "acts of self-disclosure in word and deed," as the positive significance of the credibility of love, and so, of the credibility of Christian faith and existence in the social sphere. See Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 85-87. See also Jane E. Linahan, "Kenosis: Metaphor of Relationship," in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, ed. J. Haers and P. De Mey, BETL 172 (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 2003), 299-309; and my discussion in subsection 3.2.1 of chapter 1.

⁶¹ Sobrino regards his christological efforts as such. See Jon Sobrino, "Systematic Christology: Jesus Christ, the Absolute Mediator of the Reign of God," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 124-145.

engagement of reality. In re-presenting Christ as such, Sobrino hopes that Christians would come to a recovered relationship with Christ and with others; in a way that draws them into a deeper participation in the life of Christ; and, so, are moved to become agents of his transforming love and mercy in society. I shall explore the detail of all this in the fourth section of this chapter, where I connect the actual character of the human life of Jesus Christ as disclosed by Sobrino to the lives of believers in relation to their commitment to societal transformation.

Before I begin a detailed exploration of these christological insights within the context of my discussion of Sobrino's historical Christology in section 3 of this chapter, it is important to briefly give an account of the formative experiences and the contextual development of Sobrino's Christology. In this way, Sobrino will receive a new introduction to audiences, in particular to those in the African context, unacquainted with his Christology.

2. Jon Sobrino and the Contours of His Historical Christology

In order to gain some perspective on the contextualized Christology of Jon Sobrino, a short introduction to his life is first of all necessary.⁶² This introduction is all the more important for readers in the ecclesial-social context of Africa, where some theologians and ecclesiastics, even within the Roman Catholic Church, are not very familiar with Sobrino and his works. Usually only two things are known about Sobrino in that context: one, that he is a "liberation theologian". In the (Catholic) African ecclesial context, and to anyone familiar with it, the mention of liberation theology or identification of an author as a liberation theologian is often reductively perceived as "Marxist", "unorthodox", "radical", or "rebellious", and of promoting socio-political activism within the Church. From this perception follows the second thing known about Sobrino in the African context: that he was "notified" by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith because of his 'erroneous' writings.⁶³ And for an ordinary African Catholic Christian, that would mean that Sobrino is not a 'good' believer or theologian worth engaging.⁶⁴ Yet, I would ask, to whom does

⁶² For a recent and concise biographical information, see Robert Lassalle-Klein, "Biography: Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity," in Jon Sobrino, *Spiritual Writings*, Selected with an Introduction by Robert Lassalle-Klein, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 1-5. This appears also as the personal accounts of Jon Sobrino, "Introduction: Awakening from the Sleep of Inhumanity," in *The Principle of Mercy*, 1-11. See also Valiente, *Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino's Christological Spirituality*, 57-70.

⁶³ In 2006, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith under the prefectship of William Cardinal Levada issued a "Notification" on the christological works – *Jesus the Liberator* and *Christ the Liberator* – of Jon Sobrino.

www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notification-sobrino_en.html [accessed November 20, 2016].

⁶⁴ I recall being directed by one of our theological professors, while I was undergoing the training for the Catholic priesthood in Nigeria, not to read the works of people like Jon Sobrino. The reason some African theologians and ecclesiastics, like my professor would give is that the essential task that devolves upon a Catholic theologian and a priest for that matter, is simply to serve the knowledge and understanding of the truth of revelation, to bear and fulfil a certain "dogmatic responsibility for the Christian God," and not to 'use' theology, like Sobrino does, as a resource of and instrument for socio-political discourse. For a representation of such line of reasoning see Michael Akpoghiran, "The Ambiguity of Theological Discourse in Nigeria," *The Nigerian Journal of Theology* 16 (2002): 27-42, and in Anthony Akinwale, "African Theology and Dogmatic Responsibility for the Christian God," 212-246. I think I can respond quickly to such

it belong to judge and acclaim one's fellow believer? So it is *ad rem* that in a research such as the present encompassed by the African context, which draws upon the work of someone known to be a 'notified' liberation theologian, I should provide a brief account of his life, especially in order to draw initial contours of his historical christological thinking.

2.1. Life and Work of Jon Sobrino

Jon Sobrino was born into a Basque family in Barcelona, Spain, on December 27, 1938. After attending a Jesuit secondary school, he entered the Society of Jesus in 1956. In 1957, he was sent to El Salvador to join the then Central American Vice-Province of the Society of Jesus. On completion of his novitiate formation, he went to Saint Louis University, in St. Louis, Missouri of the lower American Midwest in the United States. There he spent five years studying for degrees in philosophy and civil engineering. This might explain why Sobrino is thoughtfully critical about speculative theology, and deeply appreciative of the concrete-practical dimension of theology both in general and particularly with a view to Christology. After his years in the United States, Sobrino returned to El Salvador and became a teacher of mathematics and philosophy. In 1968, he went to Germany for higher theological studies at the Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology, a Jesuit college in Frankfurt am Main.

In those years, Sobrino came in contact with the rich philosophical corpus of thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Sartre. These were complemented by his theological experience, inspired by "the legacy of modernity, the impact of historicity on scriptural criticism, the new insights and enthusiasm with which Vatican II had infused the Catholic Church."⁶⁵ These currents would (re)shape his intellectual orientation, moving it "away from a positivist study of dogmatic formulas toward one more contextualized by historical reality."⁶⁶ Valiente, who knows Sobrino and the contours of his Christology all too well, talks about the influence of these factors on Sobrino. "Sociohistorical milieu, personal experiences, religious formation, and intellectual influences coalesce in a theological intuition that nurtures Jon Sobrino's imagination and guides his theological work."⁶⁷ They are "forces that have helped develop the spiritual disposition that informs and integrates the whole of Sobrino's theological endeavour."⁶⁸

Sobrino's doctoral thesis was on the Christologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg.⁶⁹ There is no denying that the theological method, approach, and outcome of the two thinkers would bear a remarkable influence on Sobrino's theological orientation, giving it its profoundly historical and experiential bent. Showing signs of his intellectual

views of Akinwale by saying that, we are theologians not for God's sake, since God doesn't need theology, but for the sake of human beings, and in their longing for the abundant life that God has given to every creature in Christ. So we need and do theology not in defense of God but of people, especially the poor and the vulnerable in our societies.

⁶⁵ Valiente, *Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino's Christological Spirituality*, 58.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ See Sobrino's short summary of the Christologies of Pannenberg and Moltmann in his *Christology at the Crossroad*, 25-33.

debt to Moltmann and Pannenberg, Sobrino refers to the critical role of historical reality as the source and guide for the thinking about the life and significance of Jesus Christ. This historical reality is not simply an epistemological but an existential construct, which is present and accessed in the historical situation of the crucified people of our world. In this view, Sobrino sees his theological project – and speaks of his life and personality in relation to its dynamic – as consisting in trying to make sense of divine reality in the light of human reality.

About Jon Sobrino as a theologian who embodies this theological exercise of sensing the divine in the human, Robert Lassalle-Klein explains:

“Jon Sobrino occupies a unique place as witness and interpreter of a world-altering encounter with God *in* the crucified people of the planet. The unexpected and joy-filled nature of this experience of God forms the core of Sobrino’s life and spirituality. His spiritual and theological writings are full of memories and stories recounting the “awakening” to the Holy Mystery of God in El Salvador’s suffering people.”⁷⁰

Sobrino himself had responded to the question “who are you?,” posed to him by Lassalle-Klein, as well as in a later interview he gave, published at Leuven. He says in a tone that is quite touching:

“You ask, “Who are you?” Thinking a little – and I hope without falling into cheap demagoguery – what comes to me is that, if someone wants to know, and if I myself wants to know, it will be better to ask the crucified people. They know who we are, who I am – an answer that is not far from another traditional reply: God knows us better than we know ourselves.”⁷¹

Sobrino’s sense of the crucified people and how God moves and acts amongst them causes him to privilege a theological reflection that takes seriously the social context and realities within which one does his or her theologizing. At the same time, he does not see these realities as simply accidental human circumstances; they are, for him, the privileged *place* of God’s self-revelation in Christ, a place where the mystery of God in Christ Jesus by the working of the Spirit, is made known. This is significant in the way Sobrino presents the life of Jesus as a life that is understood deeply in terms of his suffering and death, and in the light of the suffering and death of many people.⁷² Hence he speaks of the “social-theological” setting of (his) Christology. I will explore at greater length in the following subsection what Sobrino means by this designation, and how it impacts on his historical christological undertaking.

⁷⁰ Lassalle-Klein, “Biography: Awakening from the Sleep of Humanity,” in Sobrino, *Spiritual Writings*, 5.

⁷¹ Sobrino, *Spiritual Writings*, 15. See also, Joseph Drexler-Dreis, “Interview with Jon Sobrino,” 1-4.

⁷² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 33.

2.2. The Context: Social-Theological Situation of Latin America

As the backdrop of his historical Christology, Sobrino does not regard the real situation of Latin America merely in terms of socio-cultural, economic and political processes. Rather, he refers to the social condition of the Latin American context as “a particular historical situation in which God and Christ are believed to be continuing to make themselves present.”⁷³ He speaks of the social situations of people who are poor and marginalised in Latin America and elsewhere as “a theological setting” rather than a sheer “historical-pastoral” or simply theological setting.⁷⁴ According to Sobrino, the conciliar expression of Vatican II, the “signs of the times,” in fact has two meanings. The first is the historical-pastoral meaning for which the signs of the times are “events which characterize a period,” and those to which the church needs to recognize, examine, and respond pastorally.⁷⁵ But there is a second meaning which Sobrino prioritizes. It is the “historical-theological” meaning. In this sense, the signs of the times are still identified as the events that characterize a period. But more to it, they have a “sacramental dimension, in its ability to manifest God and Christ in the present.”⁷⁶ In this sense the social-theological setting of Latin America is not just “a sign of the times” but a *symbolum* of Christian faith and existence. What Sobrino describes as the “primary ecclesiality” for his Christology.⁷⁷

“The “setting” of Christology is not a direct categorical *ubi*, a particular place in geographical or spatial terms (universities, seminaries, base communities, bishop’s offices...) although it has to be in one or several of them, and each of them offers advantages and disadvantages, and ideally the specific positive characteristic of each should be present in all of them. But “setting” here means first and foremost a *quid*, a substantial situation in which Christology offers itself, allows itself to be affected, questioned and enlightened.”⁷⁸

As a result, early in his *Jesus the Liberator*, Sobrino makes clear the fact that his Christology has been developed and written owing to the situation of “war, of threats, of conflict and persecution” in El Salvador, and the reality of “unjust, cruel and overwhelming poverty.”⁷⁹ He writes that the “reality of the country has made him think a lot, and has

⁷³ Sobrino offers a detailed discussion of “the ecclesial and social setting” of his historical Christology in the second chapter of his work, *Jesus the Liberator*, 23-35, at 27. See also Jon Sobrino, “Jesus of Galilee from the Salvadoran Context: Compassion, Hope, and Following the Light of the Cross,” trans. Robert Lassalle-Klein with J. Matthew Ashley, *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 437-460, at 442-443.

⁷⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 25, 31. Valiente offers a more succinct meaning of “theological” in Sobrino’s Christology. “*Theological*”, Valiente describes, “is a term in Ignacio Ellacuría’s and Jon Sobrino’s theology that finds its origins in Xavier Zubiri’s work, and should not be confused with *theological*. While the term *theological* refers to the study of God, *theological* seeks to express the grounding of all reality in God.” Where the former is an art, the latter is an *act*. Valiente adds, “A *theological* dimension of reality refers to the “God dimension” or “graced” dimension of reality, and a *theological* spirituality refers to the spirit with which the human person encounters God and makes God present in historical reality.” See Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino,” 659.

⁷⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 25.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 29-31.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 7, 32.

helped him to think about Jesus Christ.”⁸⁰ “The challenge posed by the situation and realities of El Salvador...makes it all the more necessary to put all (my) intellect into elaborating a Christology that will help the resurrection and transformation of the Salvadorean people.”⁸¹ A Christology that will be up “against the *mysterium iniquitatis*,” as it remains “in the service of the *mysterium liberationis*.”⁸²

Thus, Sobrino considers the tragedies, suffering, oppression, injustice, and innumerable deaths in El Salvador, and not least, the hope of El Salvadorans, the “powerful hermeneutical backdrop for understanding and representing Christ.”⁸³ This backdrop, according to him, gives the good news about Jesus Christ “the taste of reality.”⁸⁴ In this way, his historical Christology becomes his contemplation of the reality of Christ inextricably linked with contemplating the realities of the crucified people of El Salvador. This twofold orientation – the contemplation of the reality Christ and the contemplation of the realities of the crucified people – in Sobrino’s Christology, could be traced, as he himself admits, to the christological spirituality of Oscar Romero, whose influence on Sobrino I shall present in the next section. This double orientation also makes Sobrino’s historical Christology a uniquely incarnational enterprise. I am inclined to add, at this point, that this dimension of Sobrino’s thought reinforces my earlier argument that the proclamation of Jesus Christ in certain images in African Christianity, and any interpretation of the same traditional images, must pay attention to the particular realities of the people that inform the expression of their faith in those images. For the interpretation to be relevant and plausible, it ought to be done in such a manner, and with insights that provide sources for an effective Christian response to those realities.⁸⁵ It should, as Sobrino puts it, “inspire believers to be active agents,” in the transformation of the societies in which they live.⁸⁶

There is another aspect to understanding the context or setting of the development of Sobrino’s historical Christology. According to Sobrino, “Latin America, a massively Christian continent, has experienced appalling oppression without faith in Christ raising any questions about this, or the image of Christ encouraging a suspicion that something was very wrong on the continent.”⁸⁷ From this point of view, Sobrino maintains that, the new image of Christ as liberator, and other images used to describe him, like healer and king in the case of this research, should at least express the suspicion, and at a deeper level signify the abolition and transformation of the painful reality of Latin America. This is why

⁸⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 5.

⁸³ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ I have argued in the first chapter that the images of Christ in African Christianity are rooted in socio-historical situation of the people. So much so that, in spite of the power of manipulation, the popularity of the images shows the people recognize themselves and their struggles therein. But the challenge that remains, as I also underlined in the chapter is, whether the images respond adequately to, and could be adopted for transforming, the socio-historical situation, and not just offering a scheme for survival.

⁸⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 12.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 14.

scholars, for example, Lasalle-Klein, argue that the goal of Sobrino’s Latin American historical Christology consists in “transforming the historical reality of El Salvador.”⁸⁸

To know reality, according to Sobrino, is not simply to know about it in a propositional way. Fully human knowledge of reality, especially the kind that promotes the human-wellbeing of all, demands the corresponding response of engaging, confronting, and changing it. This can be done within the framework of a christological mode of knowing that respects both the Incarnation and the work of salvation. That is, it is the knowledge of Christ by the way of knowing the reality in which Christ is most present; and the knowledge of reality in order to engage it as the way of coming to know Christ. This explains why I have argued in the first chapter of this dissertation that the proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ at the grassroots level has the capacity to bring one closer to the knowledge of the social realities that give rise to those images. In addition, the grassroots Christologies, while they are the expressions of faith in Jesus Christ, they are also a longing for the transformation of the realities that move majority of the Christians to invoke Christ in certain images. To put it in a somewhat Sobrinoian way, the reality of Jesus Christ and the realities of those who invoke him as their healer, liberator, and king, illuminate each other.⁸⁹

Hence, in the last analysis, Sobrino believes his historical Christology is a fulfilment of the urgent task of becoming aware and disclosing the “inhuman and anti-Christian oppression” in Latin America, and, more importantly, providing a “prophetic denunciation in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁹⁰ There are two martyrs, who, for Sobrino, embody, both intelligently and practically, and so, exemplify, this act of prophetic denunciation, thanks to their own christological spirituality and imagination. We will look briefly at their influences in the historical Christology of Sobrino, which has implications for and receives further development in his theology of martyrdom.⁹¹ This is also in view of a section (Appendix) at the end of this dissertation, where I shall present the witnesses of some individual Christian(s) moved by their christological vision, in order to illuminate how the agency of an individual or a community of believers can be so transformed and empowered by faith in (living relationship with) Jesus Christ, and thus, become oriented toward being-*for*-others, and enacting practices that bring about the transformation of their society.

⁸⁸ Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink*, 121, 187. This is the goal that is also pursued in the present research that seeks to more critically (re)present and translate the significance and radical implications of the images of Christ in African Christian and theological milieu, for the transformation of social situation in the African context.

⁸⁹ Sobrino discusses this idea in the context of his analysis of what he identifies as “a threefold isomorphism between the realities of Galilee and El Salvador.” What is of interest here is the third one, described by Sobrino as “the isomorphism between Jesus and the crucified people.” Sobrino, “Jesus of Galilee from the Salvadoran Context,” 437, 442-446. For a critical discussion of this particular theological claim about the relationship between the Crucified Christ and the crucified people, see Sturla J. Stålssett, *The Crucified and the Crucified: A Study in the Liberation Christology of Jon Sobrino* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003).

⁹⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 3.

⁹¹ See Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003). Ernesto Valiente argues that Jon Sobrino’s Christology helps in retrieving and refocusing on the christological core of martyrdom which has long been lost in the Catholic Church’s understanding of martyrdom. More to it, Valiente, in the study, builds on Jon Sobrino’s Christology, and therefrom, shows how “martyrdom is better understood when placed within the context of a Christian discipleship that reflects the centrality of Jesus’ mission and his way of engaging and transforming the world.” Valiente, “Renewing the Theology of Martyrdom,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2014): 112-127.

2.3. Influenced by Two Martyrs

2.3.1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Bonhoeffer's influence on Sobrino has been underlined by Sobrino himself and by other scholars who engage with his Christological ideas.⁹² Sobrino makes known his great admiration for Bonhoeffer in these words: "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a notable theologian of following, brought unsuspected novelties: "living *etsi Deus non daretur*," calling Jesus "the man *for* others," and in his personal life taking part in a plot against Hitler."⁹³ This, Sobrino expresses in a tone of admiration, "cost him his life: the unexpected and – among theologians – rare novelty of martyrdom."⁹⁴

There is the reference to a poem by Bonhoeffer, which further provides a useful backdrop to the influence of Bonhoeffer on Jon Sobrino. The poem is titled "Christian and Heathen," and helps to trace the line of Bonhoeffer's impact on Jon Sobrino. In addition to that, the poem highlights some of the issues that are taken into perspective in this research, on the various aspects of christological beliefs in relation to social transformation in the African context. For instance, the poem points to the idea of calling on Christ almost as *deus ex machina*, an all-powerful God, who will help Christians meet their social needs. It goes this way:

People go to God when they're in need,
plead for help, pray for blessing and bread,
for rescue from their sickness, guilt and death.
So do they all, all of them, Christians and heathens.

People go to God when God's in need,
Find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,
See God devoured by sin, weakness and death.
Christians stand by God in God's own pain.

God goes to all people in their need,
Fills body and soul with God's own bread,
goes for Christians and heathens in Calvary's death
and forgives them both.⁹⁵

Rudolf von Sinner, professor extraordinary at Stellenbosch University, avers: "It was not least this very poem by Bonhoeffer that inspired Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino."⁹⁶ Von Sinner refers first to Sobrino's *Jesus the Liberator* in order to demonstrate the influence of

⁹² Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 340. See also, for example, De Schrijver, "Jesus from the Underside of History," 504. Also, R. Von Sinner, "The Ethics of Penultimate in a Situation of Ambiguity: A Possible and Relevant Interpretation of Bonhoeffer in Brazil Today," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2, no. 2 (2016): 77-91.

⁹³ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 328. Emphasis in the original.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 8, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 485; and cited in Von Sinner, "The Ethics of Penultimate in a Situation of Ambiguity," 80.

⁹⁶ Von Sinner, "The Ethics of Penultimate in a Situation of Ambiguity," 82.

Bonhoeffer on Sobrino. According to him, and rightly so, “Sobrino insisted, as did Bonhoeffer, that only a suffering and crucified God (as read in the lines of the poem) can help.”⁹⁷ He mentions another work of Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope*, which contains a more explicit reference to Bonhoeffer’s influence on Sobrino’s Christology.⁹⁸ In the work, Sobrino quotes from the *Letters and Papers from Prison*: “God, nailed to the cross, allows that they expel him from the world. God is powerless and weak in the world, and only in this way is God with us and helps us. Only a God that suffers can help us.”⁹⁹ As such, and rightly too, one could argue that in Sobrino’s historical Christology, the logic of the cross is the hermeneutical key for appropriating the *Logos*, the identity and work of Christ. Jesus’ proclamation of his identity and all his works that provide a clue into his identity, are authenticated by his own suffering, passion and death.

Georges De Schrijver re-reads the lines in Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* aforementioned, in a deeply theological sense in what he identifies as the “theological dialectics of revelation.”¹⁰⁰ This dialectics consists of a twofold “dialectics of ‘the ultimate’ and ‘the penultimate,’” which, according to De Schrijver, Bonhoeffer had developed in his *Ethics*.¹⁰¹ Sobrino espouses this dialectics in order “to describe Jesus’ fidelity to human history as the concrete norm for fidelity to his divine mission.”¹⁰² This is how De Schrijver fleshes it out further on the basis of the insights he (De Schrijver) garners from Sobrino’s *Jesus of Latin America*:

“Jesus is faithful to the profound conviction that the mystery of the life of men, a mystery that is in favor of the life of men, is really the ultimate. The ultimate mystery warrants the earnestness of the penultimate, that is, of the seriousness of our commitments in the secular (social) realm. Jesus’ life commitment is based on the conviction that there is something ultimate in the depth of reality that is in the favour of men and which ought to be upheld at any price. Whoever lives up to this mystery, ‘knows’ that he has to espouse a lifestyle ‘in favour of others’ (*el ser en favor de otros*: Bonhoeffer’s pro-existence).”¹⁰³

De Schrijver also hoped to demonstrate, in the light of these insights, how it is “Bonhoeffer instead of Marx,” that inspires an aspect of the theological premise and the methodological orientation of Sobrino’s historical Christology.

In addition to the methodological pointer of Bonhoeffer’s influence on Sobrino, there is a deeply praxeological-ethical dimension of the influence too. It is with reference to the christological principle of “*pro nobis*,” or precisely, “*pro me*” (which Sobrino particularly

⁹⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁹⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 195. See also Sobrino, “Jesus of Galilee from the Salvadoran Context,” 438.

⁹⁹ Sobrino, *Where is God?*, 195, cited in Von Sinner, “The Ethics of Penultimate in a Situation of Ambiguity,” 83.

¹⁰⁰ De Schrijver, “Jesus from the Underside of History,” 502.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 503.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus of Latin America*, 145, as discussed in De Schrijver, “Jesus from the Underside of History,” 502-506, at 503.

recognizes in his admiration for Bonhoeffer).¹⁰⁴ This principle is translated as “for me.” Some theologians have argued that the principle of “for me” or “for us” is the “real basic law of Christian existence,” and the principle in which “the existence of Jesus Christ is explained as existence “for the many.”¹⁰⁵ The principle “makes possible and creates the communication of all with one another through communication in and with him (Christ).”¹⁰⁶ As Rowan Williams makes the point within the context of his own discussion of Bonhoeffer’s Christology: “the essential thing to say about Jesus Christ is that his person and work must be understood as radically and entirely ‘for us’.”¹⁰⁷ Williams goes on, “there is nothing to say about (Christ) and the Christian faith, that is not ultimately grounded in this understanding.”¹⁰⁸ “Christ’s essential identity lies in being *pro nobis* and *pro me*; Christ is who he is as the one who exists for my and our sake.”¹⁰⁹ Sobrino largely adopts and applies this principle in his appropriation of the historical reality of Jesus Christ. He does so, not only for Christ himself, but also for an understanding of the Christian faith and existence, and for the praxis-related response of the followers of Christ to the historical realities that give rise to the confession of Christ’s identity and work in certain images. This idea is significant in the work of exploring the theological-practical connection between faith in Jesus Christ and the transformation of society.

In discussing this influence of Bonhoeffer on Jon Sobrino I wish also to underline an essential aspect of Sobrino’s historical Christology. For Sobrino’s Christology does not end at simply offering an understanding of who Christ is or making extravagant claims about his identity and mission. Rather his historical Christology aims at showing how Christians ought to act on the basis of that knowledge. At the same time, Sobrino’s historical Christology should not be read with overly heightened expectations of dogmatic comprehensiveness.¹¹⁰ Sobrino’s Christology – as it is the case with Bonhoeffer’s – is visibly shaped by a sense of an urgent crisis, a matter of life and death in his Latin American context; and so it comes forth as a passionate reiteration of the need for a Christology that can serve “the one thing necessary” – “the service of *mysterium liberationis* against the *mysterium iniquitatis*.”¹¹¹ Sobrino was intent on developing a Christology that is able to

¹⁰⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), 43.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J.R. Foster and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 251-254, at 251. See also Graham Ward, “Speaking of Jesus Today: Towards an Engaged Systematic Theology,” in *Grace, Governance and Globalization*, ed. Stephan van Erp, Martin G. Poulson and Lieven Boeve (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 94. Ward describes this “divine principle” of “for”, as he calls it, in relation to the speech about, and the understanding of, Christ and the Christian existence. He writes: “This is a logic that follows from a commitment to incarnationism not simply as an event in history but the revelation of a divine principle – God *for us* – which cannot be separated from a Trinitarian understanding of God in Himself.” Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁶ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 251.

¹⁰⁷ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum – Publishing Plc, 2018), 170.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 190.

¹¹⁰ Such reading of Sobrino’s Christology could be seen in Aaron Riches’s *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ*, 219-222.

¹¹¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 4-5. I am also indebted to Rowan Williams for describing the Christology of Bonhoeffer in similar terms which I use here for Sobrino’s. See Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 167, 198.

address the most profound and important questions of human existence. He was seeking to think and to speak plausibly about the experience of Christ, and the transforming and liberating import of this experience. In other words, he was offering a proposal for the renewal of Christology, moving for the version of Christology whose purpose is to discern, articulate and commend a vision of human and societal transformation. And this is the underlying, overall orientation of the present dissertation.

Like Bonhoeffer, Sobrino insists that the service of the mystery of liberation in engaging reality (noetically, ethically, and transformatively) “requires that we place ourselves in the midst of these circumstances and take a stance vis-à-vis the ethical demands that the different forces of a given reality place upon us.”¹¹² To Sobrino, in this engagement of reality consists “the spirituality of following Jesus.”¹¹³ But this is not entirely original to Sobrino. Another influence on him in this regard is the “christological spirituality of Oscar Romero.” This spirituality consists in a twofold immersion of oneself into the mystery of Christ and into the networks of the social realities of the crucified people.¹¹⁴ This brings us to the next subsection that discusses the influence of Oscar Romero on Jon Sobrino and his historical Christology, which comes also as an intellectual mediation of this spirituality that Romero lived and died for.

2.3.2. Oscar Romero (1917-1980)

In the first part “My Memory of the Martyrs” of his book *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified People*, Jon Sobrino tells of some of his very personal recollections from the direct experience of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and the Saint’s influence on him.¹¹⁵ Almost forty years have passed since the martyrdom of Oscar Romero, and Sobrino still reminisces the influence of Romero on him. He shares the memory of his contact with Romero in a very recent work, referring to him as “human being, Christian, and honourable archbishop.”¹¹⁶

From this perspective, Sobrino himself considers that Romero’s influence on him is in the light of the latter’s emphasis on being honest with the real(-ity) as a follower of Jesus Christ. For Sobrino, “following is the axis around which the Christian life – and Christology

¹¹² Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 678, and cited in Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino,” 661. For an excellent, and indeed, tantalizing treatment of this relation among christological belief, ethical formation, and societal transformation in Bonhoeffer, see Rowan Williams, “Christology, Ethics and Politics: Discourses of Transformation,” in *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 199-217.

¹¹³ Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” 233-256.

¹¹⁴ Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, “Discerning and Collaborating with Christ’s Solidarity with the World: Oscar Romero’s Christological Spirituality and Its Methodological Dynamism,” Presentation in the context of the interdisciplinary academy, *Romero: Memory – Activating Heritage of International Solidarity*, organised at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, 4-8 November, 2019.

¹¹⁵ Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples*, 11-53. See also Martin Maier and Jon Sobrino, “My Memories of Archbishop Oscar Romero: Jon Sobrino and Martin Maier – A Dialogue.” Formal exchange. Brussels, February 24, 2015; and George M. Anderson, “Salvation Among the Poor: An Interview with Martin Maier,” *America: The National Catholic Weekly* 196, no. 20 (June 4-11, 2007): 16-19.

¹¹⁶ Jon Sobrino, “Monsignor Romero: Human Being, Christian and Honourable Archbishop,” trans. Thia Copper, *Concilium* 3 (2019): 136-142. See also Jon Sobrino, “Monsenor Romero, A Salvadoran and a Christian,” trans. Michael O’Laughlin, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1, no. 2 (2001): 143-155.

– must turn in order to ‘put on’ Jesus” (or “embody Christ,” to use a phrase that forms part of the title of the last chapter), and in order to be able to engage with and transform reality.¹¹⁷ He mentions Archbishop Oscar Romero, in particular, as one of the many men and women whose “generosity, love and martyrdom,” were paradigmatic in this regard.¹¹⁸

Another striking point of the influence of Romero on Sobrino’s historical Christology, which further amplifies the context of the present research, is captured by Ernesto Valiente in his words: “...Sobrino learned the importance of right Christian praxis from Romero.”¹¹⁹ Right praxis offers a hermeneutical key to the distinctiveness and character of Christian existence and form of Christian discipleship, not just as external imitation of Christ’s actions, but as the overflow of the transforming relationship of the Christian with Christ. Sobrino does not flesh out this idea as such; rather, it is my own interpretation to read these lines of theological praxis from within the substructures of his historical christological thinking. I will return to this point in due course. For the moment, it suffices to mention that such a perspective in Sobrino situates his historical Christology as a modest effort, not entirely successful, of holding in tensile unity the often-opposing tendencies between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. For example, in a recent essay by Sobrino, he considers that the Christian praxis in preferential option for the poor belongs to “ecclesiastical orthodoxy.” This is a lesson he claims he had learned from Romero, whose commitment to the poor were quite unique.¹²⁰

On the basis of this idea of Christian orthopraxis in defense of the poor, as the concrete translation of ecclesiastical orthodoxy, Sobrino sketches what it entails for the life and mission of the Church. He develops an understanding of the Church’s existence and practice as consisting, most fundamentally, in the love and service of the poor, which Sobrino insists are proper to the Church’s exercise of orthodoxy.¹²¹ The Church’s proclamation or teaching of faith in Jesus Christ requires the merciful practices that find expression mainly in the form of “mutual listening to its people and responding to their needs.”¹²² For Sobrino, as Thomas Kelly correctly notes, “the church that practices such mercy and mutuality serves the coming of the kingdom of God as well as those for whom the kingdom is primarily intended.”¹²³

According to Kelly, Sobrino draws these largely from “the christological and ministerial experiences of Archbishop Romero.”¹²⁴ In fact, as Kelly observes, these christological-ecclesiological principles are gleaned from “an analysis of their presence in

¹¹⁷ Sobrino, “Jesus of Galilee from the Salvadoran Context,” 438.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 437.

¹¹⁹ Valiente, *Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino’s Christological Spirituality*, 68.

¹²⁰ Sobrino, “Monsignor Romero: Human Being, Christian and Honourable Archbishop,” 138-140.

¹²¹ See Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (London: SCM Press, 1985). The implication of this idea for broadening and reinforcing the social mission of the Church in Africa is fleshed out in subsection 4.2 in the final chapter of this project.

¹²² This idea is based on Thomas Kelly’s systematic ecclesiological reading and synthesis of Sobrino’s *The True Church and the Poor*. See Thomas M. Kelly, “A Church Rooted in Mercy: Ecclesial Signposts in Sobrino’s Theology,” in *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Pope, 155-170, at 155.

¹²³ Kelly, “A Church Rooted in Mercy,” 156.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

the second pastoral letter of Archbishop Oscar Romero.”¹²⁵ And the principles bear insights about the very basis and mission of the Church that are important for Sobrino, and which continually emerge within the context of his historical Christology. The point in referring to them here is also because of a later reflection (in section 4 of the last chapter of this dissertation) on the theme of the ecclesial-social implications of a transformative Christology in the African context. There I shall return to some of these ecclesiological hints (traced to Romero) in Sobrino’s historical Christology.

2.4. Situating Sobrino’s Christological Project

Situating Jon Sobrino’s historical Christology within a broad christological tradition is important for two reasons. The first reason has to do with Sobrino’s assenting orthodoxy. What this means is that in Sobrino’s Christology, the core elements of ‘classic’ christological profession of faith are upheld, even while the elements are presented in a relentlessly historical positive key. Hence, his Christology, as will be made clear from the themes we will discuss, builds on what has gone before, enriches our thinking about what the reality of Jesus and faith in him means, both for the Christian life and for a reinforced sense of Christian responsibility in the social sphere. Besides, the Church herself has always made an external, ethical turn towards the social aspect of the world, in view of joining efforts towards its transformation.

Of the second reason, it is important that in a work that pursues a transformative Christology – that is, a Christology that can inspire the transformation of lives and society – in the light of Sobrino’s historical Christology, I should sketch the lines of its development within a broader ecclesial-theological frame. In that way I establish the intelligibility of Sobrino’s account of Christ, while laying out further, some of the many levels of the relation between belief in Christ and societal transformation, which any systematic Christology of social transformation would have to engage.

2.4.1. *Tracing the Specific Lines of Its Development*

a. *Gaudium et Spes* and the Theology of Sign

Sobrino considers his christological work to be his modest attempt at taking seriously the mandate by the Second Vatican Council, to recognize and respond to the “signs of the times.”¹²⁶ Following Ignacio Ellacuría, Sobrino asserts that, “the signs of the times...par excellence, ‘is the existence of a crucified people’ of which the prime demand on us is that ‘we take them from the cross.’”¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 25. See also Ernesto Valiente, “The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America,” *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 795-823, at 800-801.

¹²⁷ Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, vii, and as cited in Valiente, “The Reception of Vatican II in Latin America,” 801. Sobrino dwells consistently on this Ellacurian idea even in his later works. See for example, Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 1-18, 35-76, 109-128.

Early in his *Jesus the Liberator*, he announces that his christological works have been written “in hope and joy”¹²⁸ and, moreover, that this *sign* (the historical Christ) of the time will continue to give a better understanding and animate a lively response to the *signs* (the historical realities) of our times.¹²⁹ Sobrino, drawing inspiration from the Fathers of the Vatican II Council, expresses the idea further, launching his historical christological project off the ground: “In the council, recognizing these historical realities, these signs of the times was declared essential for determining the mission of the church...and it ought to be central for Christology also.”¹³⁰ He then distinguishes between the historical-pastoral sense and the historical-theological sense of the signs of the times in his reading of the fourth and the eleventh paragraph of *Gaudium et Spes*.¹³¹ As I discussed already, Sobrino prioritises the latter, that is, the historical-theological connotation; and he delineates its significance for (his) Christology.¹³² Echoing the words of the council Fathers, Sobrino affirms that, the signs of the times are the “happenings, needs and desires,” which are the “authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose.”¹³³ Thus, the signs of the times are the historical realities within which the presence and act of Christ ought to be collaborated with, following appropriate discernment and integration.¹³⁴

For Sobrino, the christological imagination at Medellín and Puebla contains “the most novel features” of this process of discerning and integrating the signs of the times.¹³⁵ According to him, Medellín recognizes the presence of Christ in the history, “the longings and victories in the context of the longed-for transformation of the continent.”¹³⁶ These longings and victories are the signs of the time that provide the “hermeneutical settings” for Christology and the “conditions for the possibility of understanding Christ.”¹³⁷ He phrases the point somewhat more boldly: “unless we participate in the impatient human longing for total redemption, and unless we participate in the transforming victories, we shall not adequately grasp the presence of Christ in history.”¹³⁸ So for Sobrino, the reality or the image of Christ as liberator, and faith in him as such, “with the emphasis on the presence of Christ now in history, is a sign of the times.”¹³⁹ A sign that the community of the Church must bear witness to. This witness requires to be made a living reality in the circumstances of Christ’s people and God’s children everywhere.

¹²⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 8.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² See subsection 2.2. of this chapter, footnote reference no. 74, *supra*.

¹³³ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 11, cited in Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 25.

¹³⁴ I argued in the first chapter of this dissertation, that the vibrant christological imagination at the grassroots are symbols of faith and signs of the historical realities of many people who confess their belief in Jesus Christ, and by that, express their hope for the transformation of their society. Hence, the christological faith at the grassroots is both a proclamation and a longing, a confession of faith and a desire for social well-being.

¹³⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 17.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* I shall draw further on this idea in talking about the commitment to, and the realization of, the transformation of society in Africa as a profoundly christological “act” and “event”, respectively, in subsections 4.2.2a. and b. of this chapter, and shall return to it once again in the final chapter of this dissertation.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

b. Rahnerian Root: “Saving History” Christology from below

Jon Sobrino’s historical Christology, or what he would also refer sometimes to as “saving history” Christology goes back to and builds somewhat from Karl Rahner.¹⁴⁰ In the thirteenth volume of his *Theological Investigations*, Rahner distinguishes “two basic types of Christology.”¹⁴¹ He calls the first “the ‘saving history’ type, a Christology from below.”¹⁴² For Rahner, this is found in the New Testament. He argues that “the point of departure for this Christology is the simple experience of the man Jesus, and of the resurrection in which his fate was brought to its conclusion.”¹⁴³ The key themes in the discussion of this type are “the simple experience of Jesus,” that is, his life and ministry, and the “the resurrection.” Hence, we read in Sobrino’s appropriation of the historical reality of Jesus for the meaning of faith in him, and its implication for Christian commitment to social transformation, he (Sobrino) also focuses extensively on the life of Jesus, his mission, and his resurrection. In the life of Jesus, emphasis is placed on (1) his relationship to the Father and other human beings; (2) his directedness or service to the Kingdom of God in his ministry, and (3) his resurrection which is expounded on as reinforcing the very ground of Christian hope and discipleship. These are the key themes we shall take up in the second part of section 3 where I discuss in greater detail the content of the historical Christology of Sobrino.

The second type of Christology according to Rahner is “the metaphysical type, a Christology developing downwards from above.”¹⁴⁴ Rahner suggests that this second type is typical of the Christologies of Chalcedon and the other early ecumenical councils. Sobrino appreciates this Rahnerian distinction. In fact, the themes he treated in his two christological volumes, as I already illustrated with the first type, follow this basic structure as outlined by Rahner: the incarnation, mission, death, resurrection of Jesus, and then, the creedal formulations about the identity and work of Jesus.

But apart from the structural adaptation from Rahner, Sobrino vividly situates his Christology within the first christological distinction drawn by Rahner, namely, the so-called Christology from below, precisely, Rahner’s saving-history Christology. Sobrino appreciates Rahner’s christological move because, according to him, “Rahner never tired of stressing the “true humanity” of Christ and of rejecting an understanding of the incarnation as a chance visit by God to this world disguised as a human being.”¹⁴⁵ This is how Lassalle-Klein describes this influence of Rahner on Sobrino, and in the connection of his historical Christology to Rahner’s saving-history Christology:

“Sobrino explicitly ties his Christology to this undertaking of Karl Rahner...to restore to Christ his true humanity, which “insisted on thinking of the humanity of Christ

¹⁴⁰ See Jon Sobrino, “Karl Rahner and Liberation Theology,” *The Way* 43, no 4 (October 2004): 53-66.

¹⁴¹ Karl Rahner, “The Two Basic Types of Christology,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 13, trans. David Bourke (New York, NY: Seabury, 1975), 213-223.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 213-214.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 45. See also Sobrino’s short treatment of the “Christology of Rahner,” in Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 22-25.

“sacramentally.” And Sobrino adopts the “basically chronological” pattern of christological reflection “found in the New Testament,” where “Jesus’ mission of service to the Kingdom” raises “the question about the person of Jesus,” ultimately answered by the disciple’s confession of his unrepeatable and salvific reality.”¹⁴⁶

This, for Lassalle-Klein, reflects “Rahner’s characteristic insistence on the unity of the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith,” that is, “the unity of history and transcendence in Jesus.”¹⁴⁷ And there is no denying the fact that, the “transformative Christology,” which the present dissertation pursues is a contextualised exemplification of this “saving-history” Christology of Rahner. The philosophical screw for holding together in a unit the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith in Sobrino’s historical Christology, was inspired by the work of his long-time companion, Ignacio Ellacuría. I turn in what follows to the impact of his (Ellacuría) fundamental philosophical christological insights on Sobrino’s historical christological thinking.

c. Ignacio Ellacuría’s Christian Historical Realism

Ignacio Ellacuría’s influence on Jon Sobrino’s historical Christology surpasses a philosophical one.¹⁴⁸ Theirs was one of “long years of Jesuit friendship, shared ministry and persecution,” leading up to the martyrdom of Ellacuría in 1989.¹⁴⁹ Thus, the influence of Ellacuría on Sobrino is a profoundly personal one, but it also receives expression in the intellectual life and work of the latter. While I cannot do justice to Ellacuría’s insights here, as that is beyond the scope of this research, a word is warranted on his “Christian historical realism,” or his “philosophy of historical reality.” It has to be reviewed because of its influence on the development of Sobrino’s historical Christology.

Ernesto Valiente avers that, “[n]o other theologian has influenced Sobrino’s work more directly than Ignacio Ellacuría.”¹⁵⁰ Valiente captures this claim pointedly when he says: “If Sobrino learned the importance of right Christian praxis from Romero (as we have just discussed), from Ignacio Ellacuría he learned that there is nothing more practical than a good theory.”¹⁵¹ Hence, Ellacuría’s philosophical and methodological foundations will provide the springboard for Sobrino’s historical Christology. Robert Lassalle-Klein also refers to this Ellacurían influence on Sobrino. “Jon Sobrino’s two-volume Latin American Christology,” Lassalle-Klein writes, “builds on Ellacuría’s philosophical concept of historical reality and his theology of sign.”¹⁵² The former is what I shall discuss here, while

¹⁴⁶ Lassalle-Klein, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People,” 357.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 357-358.

¹⁴⁸ A glimpse of this could be felt in reading the lines of Jon Sobrino’s moving letter to Ignacio Ellacuría in *The Principle of Mercy*, 187-190.

¹⁴⁹ See Jon Sobrino, “Ignacio Ellacuría, the Human Being and the Christian: Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross,” in *Love that Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría*, ed. Kevin F. Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 1-67. See also Lassalle-Klein, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People,” 348.

¹⁵⁰ Valiente, *Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino’s Christological Spirituality*, 52.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁵² Lassalle-Klein, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People,” 356.

the latter has been traced more decisively to Sobrino's inspiration from *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II Council.

The Christian historical realism of Ellacuría which Sobrino himself says “made the greatest impact on him” was itself influenced by the phenomenology of Zubiri, a continental philosopher.¹⁵³ It is based on the philosophical concept of historical reality and the process of historicization. This “process of historicizing reality,” as Ellacuría designates it, means the appropriation and transformation of the real. And it has a threefold dimension – noetic, ethical, and practical. Sobrino, referring to a crucial, much-cited text in Ellacuría, writes:

“This act of facing real things in their reality has a threefold dimension: *getting a grip of reality*, which implies being in the reality of things – and not merely facing the idea of things or in touch with their meaning – a “real” being in the reality of things, which in its active nature of being is the complete opposite of a thing-like, inert way of being and implies being among them through their material, active mediations; *taking on the burden of reality*, an expression that indicates the fundamentally ethical character of understanding which was not given to us so that we could evade our real commitments, but to take upon ourselves what things really are and what they demand; *taking responsibility for reality*, an expression that indicates the practical nature of understanding, which only fulfils its function, including that of knowing reality and understanding meaning, when it takes responsibility for real activity.”¹⁵⁴

Sobrino traces the lines of its influence in the development of his own historical Christology thus:

“What this way of envisaging understanding means for a christological thinking, for “knowing” Christ is the following: it means “getting a grip on the reality of Christ,” for which the most effective way is to go back to the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth; it means “taking on the burden of Christ’s reality,” that is, readiness to listen to and respond to his real moral demands and persist in that; it means taking responsibility for Christ’s reality,” that is, making him productive in a real liberating praxis that makes its cause real.”¹⁵⁵

2.4.2. Two Coordinates of Sobrino's Christological Approach

What immediately strikes one's attention in these lines is a pattern in Sobrino's consideration of the task of Christology, which had once been described lucidly and quite helpfully by Walter Kasper. “Christology, in which identity and relevance are revealed in a unique and complete manner, is the task of theology today.”¹⁵⁶ This idea for situating the historical Christology of Sobrino merits further consideration. So, in this subsection, I

¹⁵³ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 279.

¹⁵⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 34. Emphasis in the original. Sobrino writes “that this way of envisaging the functioning of understanding (within the framework of the historicization of reality) is one of the aspects of Ellacuría's thought that made the greatest impact on (him).” Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 279.

¹⁵⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 35.

¹⁵⁶ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 5; and as I have discussed in Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, “Experiencing Christology: Donald Gelpi's Interpretation of the Chalcedonian Christological Formula” (unpublished research master thesis, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, 2016).

would like to briefly consider two important coordinates of Sobrino's christological approach. They could be safely traced in the lines of his "Introduction" to *Jesus the Liberator*. There Sobrino writes: "I set out the life of Jesus in relation to the central dimensions of his life: his service to the *Kingdom of God*, his relationship to *God-the-Father* and his death on the cross."¹⁵⁷ He goes on, "throughout this, I endeavour to stress and hold together the liberative, and so, good-news (transformative), dimension of both Jesus' *mission* and his *person*."¹⁵⁸ Jesus's mission – to transform the world and to build God's Kingdom of love – is good news, and it is the good news about his whole life. Doing so, Sobrino opines, would encourage Christians to "fix their eyes on Jesus," and to carry on the mission of proclaiming this good news.¹⁵⁹ It is also a very seminal step in disclosing in a unique and complete manner, the intrinsic relation between faith in Christ and societal transformation. In accord with this preliminary train of reasoning, I think two characterization of Sobrino's christological approach could be spelt out, one following from the other.

a. Jesus Christ: Identity and Relevance

In his *Jesus the Liberator*, Sobrino, referring sympathetically to the aforementioned remarks of Kasper, writes: "Walter Kasper's words at the beginning of his Christology speak volumes: "If the Church worries about identity, it risks a loss of relevance; if on the other hand, it struggles for relevance, it may forfeit its identity."¹⁶⁰ Sobrino then makes the point that, "Latin American Christology, in contrast, offers a new real image that unifies both."¹⁶¹ For Sobrino, his (re)presentation of the "image" of Christ as liberator "conveys the *relevance* of Christ for a continent of oppression."¹⁶² According to him, "it is liberating, and better recovers the *identity* of Christ...because it directs us to Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁶³ Then he surmises that "in this historic coincidence of relevance and identity, Latin American Christology differs from others."¹⁶⁴

What Sobrino means to say here is that the interpretation of the reality of Christ ought to be carried out in such a manner that is relevant within a particular historical situation. Thus, he shares the conviction of Kasper that, "Christology can and should approach and tackle the legitimate concern" of every human community.¹⁶⁵ "Thinking about Christ discloses the help which is needed at the moment and which theologians can give society in their own search for identity."¹⁶⁶ Sobrino says much the same thing about his own christological commitment by which he feels pressed into the work of liberation and

¹⁵⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 6. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 4.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

reconciliation in El Salvador as elsewhere in the world.¹⁶⁷ In this way, Sobrino's historical Christology fulfils the task of Christology as articulated by Walter Kasper for whom "a universally responsible Christology...has to do at least in rudimentary terms with the relation between faith in Jesus Christ and human or social needs and questions."¹⁶⁸ For Sobrino, "the arduous and demanding task – the perennial, inescapable task – of responding to these (social) questions and needs a spirituality."¹⁶⁹ This brings me to the second characteristic of his Christology.

b. *Sequela Christi*: Uniquely "Theological Spirituality"¹⁷⁰

For Sobrino, Christology is not just a matter of knowledge and practice but also of spirituality. He sustains the conviction that his christological *work* is a form, or rather an expression of spirituality. Sobrino believes spirituality is not simply about the ascent to God. It is also not the fostering of unitary experience with God through the withdrawal from the realities of the world in order to throw oneself into the practice of devotions. Rather, spirituality, for Sobrino, "is the spirit of a subject – an individual or a group – in its relationship with the whole of reality."¹⁷¹ As such, his understanding of spirituality, according to Valiente, "focuses on the human person's capacity for self-transcendence through his or her engagement of the world."¹⁷² This idea follows from a positive anthropological premise in Sobrino's understanding of spirituality which underlines the fact that "every human being has a spiritual life."¹⁷³ Hence the spirituality flows from the capacity of each and every person to respond with compassion when confronted with reality.

Along this line of thinking, Sobrino envisages that his Christology, and indeed, every Christology, should be reconceived as a way of thinking that tries to respond to the reality of one's context. Sobrino's christological reflections could also be read and appreciated as the effort to construct a Christian spirituality of personal and social transformation in response to the particular reality of suffering, poverty, and injustice in his context. In fact, early in his introduction to his first volume, he says that the reality of El Salvador has made and helped him to think extensively about Jesus Christ.¹⁷⁴ Thus, in speaking about the "orientation of his Christology," he avers that it is in "its deepest essence...something

¹⁶⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 6-9; idem, *Christ the Liberator*, 8. See also Valiente, *Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino's Christological Spirituality*, 7.

¹⁶⁸ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 8-9.

¹⁶⁹ Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, 233-236, at 233.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁷¹ Jon Sobrino, "Presuppositions and Foundations of Spirituality," in *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, 13.

¹⁷² Valiente, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino," 659. See also Valiente, *Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino's Christological Spirituality*, 7. There Valiente explains that, "Sobrino's Christology can be understood most fruitfully in terms of its roots in spirituality...a Christian spirituality that is capable of fostering a renewed communal identity, a liberating praxis, and an experience of reconciliation."

¹⁷³ Jon Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 680.

¹⁷⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 8.

spiritual.”¹⁷⁵ It is a work, “the theoretical task,” that brings him into “a mode of being Christ.”¹⁷⁶ Sobrino, therefore, considers that his Christology, as every other “useful” Christology, “should help persons and communities to meet Christ, to follow the cause of Jesus, to live as new men and women and to conform this world to the heart of God.”¹⁷⁷ In addition to that, every Christology, like the one we pursue in this project, should empower every human person, Christians and non-Christians alike, to confront together the challenges of systemic social injustice and to realize “*the transformation brought about by Jesus*.”¹⁷⁸

Gerald O’Collins upholds this view of Sobrino’s Christology as a uniquely “theological spirituality”, or simply, Christian spirituality. According to O’Collins, Sobrino’s Christology “embodies a spirituality of active discipleship.”¹⁷⁹ His christological insights are visibly shaped by a sense of the painful crisis in the Latin American ecclesial and social context. Thus, the insights are inspired by, and are filled with a passionate reiteration of the need for the Church and her children, as “followers of Christ” to embody Christ’s own healing, liberating, and saving presence and act. So that in this view, Sobrino’s Christology must not be read, as I mentioned earlier, with undue expectations of doctrinal exactness and completeness. For he was trying to develop a way of *being* Christian in a situation of suffering, and not just about *understanding* Christian faith, even though he never lost sight of doctrines. His whole effort at explaining the faith was done in the understanding that doctrine is lived. It is in and as lived, that proclaiming, understanding, and speaking of Jesus Christ occurs in the most relevant and plausible way. In other words, by recognizing and living faithfully to its social mission, the Church and its members are able to witness to the transformative presence of Christ. This living out draws from and re-presents a characteristic form of spirituality. We shall return to this idea in chapter four. There I flesh out some further ramifications of appropriating Christ’s existence for the work of social transformation. This will be done precisely in the fourth section where I work out the implications of the relation of christological belief to social transformation, for thinking further about the meaning of Christology, and for broadening the Church’s understanding of her (social) identity and mission in the African context.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 7. I have suggested in the introduction to this work that one of the urgent tasks of African theologians is to reflect critically but constructively on the vibrant christological imagination present in the African Christian consciousness; and to do so not just for the sake of creating ‘new’ African christological models, but, more importantly, to inspire a new form of Christian discipleship. In other words, their christological reflections should have a profoundly evangelical resonance, which is aimed at not simply clarifying christological languages or, settling scores in the academic space, but rather to help bring people to a richer relationship with Christ, and so, re-orient them to become active subjects in the transformation of their societies.

¹⁷⁸ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 1.

¹⁷⁹ O’Collins, “Developments in Christology,” 165.

3. Jon Sobrino's Historical Christology: The Keys and Content

We have tried to delineate the contours of Jon Sobrino's historical Christology in the course of the preceding section. In doing that, we have already begun to see that Sobrino's appropriation and presentation of Jesus will be determined by a distinctive element: the ongoing divine reality and event of the earthly life and mission of Jesus Christ through his humanity. As such, Sobrino's Christology takes seriously the dense particularity of Jesus' personality and work. This particularity is also referred to in such terms as "the *concretissimus*, the determinedly particular Christ."¹⁸⁰ It is from this particularity that the universality of Christ for every context is realized. For Sobrino, the historical particularities of Jesus' life affirm his complete humanity, on the one hand, and offers to Christians in every age, "concrete normative reference points for their own lives," on the other.¹⁸¹

This is how Sobrino reflects on and re-articulates the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ. It is his own distinctive version of the co-inherent and non-competitive vision of history and eternity, finite and infinite, unicity and universality, that runs through the tradition of classical christological formulation and teaching. As such, the reference to the "historical" should not make us think Sobrino's Christology does not take seriously the principle of divine transcendence.¹⁸² While it does so, his Christology is a modest attempt to fulfil what Kasper describes as "the fundamental tasks for Christology at the present time," the presentation of "an historically determined or oriented Christology, and a universally responsible Christology."¹⁸³ Hence Sobrino's historical Christology is rooted in Christian tradition.

Before embarking on the detailed analysis of Jon Sobrino's historical Christology, a point of clarification which also helps in the delimitation of our discussion is necessary again here. We may recall that in the general introduction to this research, we had underscored the fact that this project is not meant as a comprehensive study of Sobrino's Christology. Our primary intent is to bring Sobrino's christological thought to bear on this issue that is at the heart of our study, namely, the significance of faith in Jesus Christ for the transformation of societies. Or, specifically, the consideration of Sobrino's portrayal of the meaning and import of Christ's life and work for Christian commitment to social transformation; and, how Sobrino's thought can contribute to a more critical appropriation of the way Christ is (re)imagined in the quest for the transformation of societies in Africa.

Consequently, and in line with my modest aim as regards the engagement with Sobrino's thoughts in this research, I will limit my analysis of Sobrino's saving history or historical Christology by focusing primarily, though not exclusively, on his two-volume work on Christology. As already cited, the first volume is his *Jesus the Liberator: A*

¹⁸⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology: The Word Made Flesh*, vol. 1, trans. A.V. Littledale and Alexander Dru (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), 162, as cited in Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 19.

¹⁸¹ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 134-138.

¹⁸² In this regard, see Sobrino's discussion under the title "From the Story of Jesus to His Transcendent Reality," in his *Christ the Liberator*, 225-228.

¹⁸³ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 8-9.

Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁸⁴ It was translated from the Spanish edition.¹⁸⁵ The second volume also translated from the Spanish edition is titled *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*.¹⁸⁶ Volume one, *Jesus the Liberator*, discusses two aspects of Jesus' history. They are (1) "the mission and faith of Jesus," and (2) "the cross and death of Jesus."¹⁸⁷ The second volume continues the discussion with what Sobrino describes also as (three) aspects of the historical life of Jesus. And they are: (3) "the resurrection of Jesus," (4) "christological titles in the New Testament," and (5) "conciliar Christology."¹⁸⁸ These five aspects of Sobrino's historical Christology, as they are, touch on the content of what theologians call the Christ-event. I will say something more about the five aspects, at the beginning of my discussion of the content of Sobrino's historical Christology.

For the purpose of my discussion in two parts, I will be drawing on the two volumes simultaneously under the various themes that will help us to do justice to Sobrino's historical Christology, and within the overall context of the present research. As I proceed in the discussion, I also refer to two earlier christological works: *Christology at the Crossroads* (1978) and *Jesus in Latin America* (1987), as well as a number of other christological works by Sobrino himself, and other secondary literature on his Christology. Let me begin the discussion under what could be considered as the first part of Sobrino's historical Christology: the keys.

§ THE KEYS TO SOBRINO'S CHRISTOLOGY

3.1. Faith in the Gospel of Christ

Sobrino believes that it is always "good and necessary" in writing a Christology, "to allow oneself to be affected and challenged by the gospel, the portrait of Jesus Christ as it emerges in the New Testament narratives."¹⁸⁹ That is why the gospel is for Sobrino the primary *locus christologicus*. According to Lassalle-Klein, Sobrino's christological reflection on the figure and work of Christ "is not determined arbitrarily, but is based on a trajectory he discovers in the Gospel."¹⁹⁰ More than that, his reflection is an effort at the creative rediscovery of the presence of Christ or his self-revelation in the realities of people *hic et nunc*. Based on this understanding, Sobrino prioritizes a christological approach that is not simply one of "reinterpretation of the New Testament Christologies."¹⁹¹ This, for him, "would fall into a sort of 'christological deism', as though Christ had been present and

¹⁸⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

¹⁸⁵ Sobrino, *Jesucristo liberador: Lectura histórica-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (San Salvador: UCA, 1991).

¹⁸⁶ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001) from *La fee n Jesucristo: Ensayo desde las victimas* (San Salvador: UCA, 1999).

¹⁸⁷ See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 67-192 and 193-271, respectively.

¹⁸⁸ See Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 9-110, 111-218, and 219-330, respectively.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁹⁰ Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People," 360.

¹⁹¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 25.

active at the origin of the faith, but had later lost interest in history,” or that he is no longer present and active in the continuous living of faith in him today and always.¹⁹²

There is another fine point in Sobrino’s articulation of the sources of his Christology already highlighted. It is the idea that the source of Christology is inseparable from the “setting,” or *locus*.¹⁹³ Therefore, the text or site of revelation, which, no doubt, he upholds as the Gospel, is not the only source of his Christology. He also rightly considers the actual realities of God’s children, *where* faith in Jesus Christ is lived, as another site of christological belief and reflection. In other words, Sobrino pays attention both to the context of the revelation in the Scriptures as well as the context in which faith is lived out in every setting. So “it is important for Christology not only to analyse the texts about Christ and take account of his presence now in history, but also to discern and analyse real faith.”¹⁹⁴ This is why the present research begins with and from a constructive-theological encounter (or phenomenology, in Kasper’s term) of faith in Christ as it is proclaimed and practiced in the Christian Churches at the grassroots. Sobrino bases this idea on a fundamental theoretical-theological premise, which is “the correlation between *fides quae*, the content of what is believed, that is, the reality of Jesus Christ, and *fides qua*, the act of believing in this content.”¹⁹⁵

Sobrino then adds a very interesting line which reinforces my critical analysis of the grassroots Christologies in the light of the traditional sources I engaged with in the first chapter of this dissertation. Sobrino says: “it is not that faith creates its object, which is why we always have to go back to the New Testament in order to see if the act of faith corresponds to the reality of Christ.”¹⁹⁶ Consequently, Sobrino maintains that the “analysis of actual faith in Christ is thus important *a priori* for Christology.”¹⁹⁷ “Not only believers’ “image” of Christ, but their act of faith, their response to, and correspondence in the reality of their lives with this image, helps Christology to penetrate the reality of Christ and understand texts about him.”¹⁹⁸ Sobrino then concludes, referring explicitly to Karl Rahner, whom we had talked about his influence on Sobrino, that “it is perfectly legitimate for a

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 23. Emphasis original.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 26. Sobrino uses the word “real” in the sense of the faith of people living in challenging, concrete social situations; a faith that takes seriously the reality of everyday life. See subsection 2.2 above where I describe the social-theological context of Sobrino’s Christology.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 27. In section 4 of chapter one, following my examination and critique of the three images of Christ dominant in the grassroots Christian communities, I tried to (re)connect the believers’ narratives of Jesus’ identity and work as healer, liberator, and king to the biblical, ecclesial, and traditional-conciliar sources. I did that for three purposes. First, like Sobrino says, to see if the narratives of faith in Christ (I presented in subsection 3.1. of that chapter one) correspond to and are consistent with the reality of Christ as it emerges in these ‘classical’ sources. The second purpose is to probe further (as I did in subsection 3.2) the operation and functionality of the grassroots Christologies. By doing so, I was able to establish the theological character and significance of the grassroots Christologies, on the one hand, and to critique their theological-practical limits, on the other hand. The third purpose which follows from the others was to work out (in section 5 of that same chapter one) the lines along which the critical potential of christological beliefs could be discerned, disclosed, and realized as resources for social engagement. And these are along the lines of (1) relationship with Christ and with other people, (2) empowered agency of Christians towards the enthronement of the values of the Kingdom, and (3) the enactment of practices of solidarity.

¹⁹⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 27.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Christology to start from our relationship with Jesus Christ.”¹⁹⁹ This idea affirms my choice and decision to begin this research by examining the experience and expression of faith in Christ by Christians at the grassroots. More precisely, the reference to “relationship with Christ” tells something of the method Sobrino uses in his christological reflections. The method could be designated as a complementary christological hermeneutic. Let me say something briefly and in broad strokes about it.

This method receives a very clear expression in the first volume of Joseph Ratzinger’s christological trilogy. Ratzinger’s description of this method also helps to elucidate the idea we are striving to understand about Sobrino’s view on what the sources and method of Christology should be, particularly of his historical Christology. In this connection I should like to quickly add the following observation. The understanding and the use of this method together show something of a potential dialogue between Ratzinger and Sobrino in their christological visions for societal transformation.²⁰⁰ That the two authors give credence to this method would point to a line of similarity in their christological imagination for the pursuit of societal transformation, against the view that their christological ideas are dissimilar or even antagonistic, as some theologians are inclined to suggest.²⁰¹ Rather than pursue the thought further here as it is something of a digression, let me return to how Ratzinger describes the complementary christological hermeneutic. This will help me to come to terms with how Sobrino himself understands the method, which is the main point at this juncture.

Ratzinger writes that: “This christological hermeneutic...is a process that is not linear, and it is often dramatic.”²⁰² It “sees Jesus as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the bible (Gospel) as a unity.”²⁰³ There is another stirring line in Ratzinger’s description of this method. It comes very close to what Sobrino says about the complementarity of the christological hermeneutic, or “hermeneutical circle,” to borrow a phrase of Lassalle-Klein, and why it is of crucial importance for Christology.²⁰⁴ Lassalle-Klein refers to this fact of “hermeneutical circle” in order to explain the legitimacy and adequacy of Sobrino’s methodological orientation in which Sobrino holds in tensile unity “the option for the poor of the contemporary church, and the church’s normative tradition regarding Jesus Christ.”²⁰⁵ In a similar train of reasoning, Ratzinger upholds the method as

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. The work of Karl Rahner (with Wilhelm Thüsing) that is being referred to here is his *A New Christology*, in which Rahner is cited to have based his argument on the fact that, “the original *unity* of Christ’s ‘being in itself’ and his ‘meaning for us’ [that is, our relationship, life, and existence with him] cannot be dissolved.” (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), cited in Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, (footnote reference no. 13), 277.

²⁰⁰ For a fine collection of essays exploring Joseph Ratzinger’s vision of how relationship with Christ is the true basis of social progress, based on a critical-empathetic reading of his 2009 social encyclical letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, and also within the context of his “(Word) Christology,” see Peter J. Casarella, ed., *Jesus Christ: The New Face of Social Progress* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015). See also Lisa Sowle Cahill, “*Caritas in Veritate*: Benedict’s Global Reorientation,” *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 291-319.

²⁰¹ This could be seen in the lines of Georges de Schrijver’s reading and analysis of one of Ratzinger’s article on Liberation Theology as “a case of overkill” of Sobrino’s Christology. See De Schrijver, “Christology from the Underside of History: The Case of Jon Sobrino,” 498-502.

²⁰² Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Lassalle-Klein, “Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People,” 349.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

a process or, a “procedure” (Sobrino’s preferred word) in which the scripture is “reappropriated, reinterpreted, and read with new eyes in new contexts.”²⁰⁶ The christological hermeneutic is a process “in which the word unfolds its inner potentialities, already somehow present like seeds,” and here is the line, “but needing the challenge of new situations, new experiences and new sufferings, in order to open up.”²⁰⁷ Ratzinger goes on to remark that the method “presupposes a prior act of faith.”²⁰⁸ Sobrino would also acknowledge the “presupposition of faith,” as the starting point for Christology, which I treat in greater detail in the next subsection.

3.2. The Whole Reality of Christ

Sobrino states that, offering a critical systematic-theological analysis of the person of Jesus Christ, “presupposes, in a sense, the theologian’s faith in the whole reality of Jesus Christ of which he seeks to give an account (cf. 1 Pe 3:15).”²⁰⁹ He expresses it as follows: “I certainly write from the reality of faith and hope, set in motion by the event of Jesus Christ.”²¹⁰ This means that his historical Christology, even though it is a modest but an ambitious effort to study and tell of “the reality of Jesus Christ as he really was in life,” is also the testimony of the theologian’s faith and hope in Jesus Christ. And by the whole reality of Jesus Christ, Sobrino means “the most historical aspect of Jesus” by which we come to believe in and know him as the Son of the living God who has come into the world (cf. Mt 16:16; Jn 11:27).²¹¹ That is, “the life of Jesus of Nazareth, his words and actions, his activity and his praxis, his attitudes and his spirit, his fate on the cross (his passion, suffering and death) and his resurrection.”²¹² What I have said a while ago that theologians refer to as the Christ-event.

The Christ-event, according to Sobrino, must be understood not just as the ‘object’ of knowledge, as seen in the works of many theologians. He insists that the Christ-event, as the object of his historical Christology, is not simply a matter for an investigation that “seeks to establish the possibilities and reasonableness of the person and the event, and of the act of believing or not believing” in them.²¹³ Sobrino is critical of such tendencies in most academic or constructive European Christologies that treat the Christ-event as object of speculation divorced from loving relation to Christ and discipleship. So he maintains unapologetically, referring to the statement of González Faus, a Spanish Jesuit theologian, that his own engagement with the Christ-event in his historical Christology, while it is written in a highly academic manner, is meant to bring people to a living relationship with a person, Jesus Christ, whose word and work transforms the social order. In this way, his Christology, the conscientious elucidation of this reality, is also an account of *the relationship with Christ and Christ’s relationships with people*, within the events of life

²⁰⁶ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xviii. Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 28.

²⁰⁷ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix. Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 3-8.

²⁰⁸ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xix. Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 2-3.

²⁰⁹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 36.

²¹⁰ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 2.

²¹¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 50.

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

and faith in Latin America. In this view, the Christ-event in Sobrino's historical Christology could be held as the "criterion of discipleship."²¹⁴ He insists that an appeal to it (the Christ-event) should be "to confront people with the dilemma of being converted," to be and to act like Christ.²¹⁵ This is the task that the present research argues is somewhat absent in the popular and constructive christological imagination in African context, and seeks to trace the lines of its possibility and integration in christological discourse about social transformation in that context.

For Sobrino, such christological task could be carried out and sustained if, what he calls, "the reality principle," which is only implicit in the Christologies of the New Testament, is taken more seriously.²¹⁶ The meaning of this principle, and Sobrino's appropriation of it as the fundamental datum in his historicization of the identity and work of Jesus Christ is the subject of our discussion in the next subsection.

3.3. The Reality Principle: The Historical Life of Christ

The fundamental idea in Sobrino's analysis of the identity and work of Christ is "the *reality* of Christ in the *present*, that is, his presence now in history, which is the correlative of real faith in Christ."²¹⁷ That is, Jesus Christ continues to be present *wherever* faith in him is lived and expressed, even in unexpected places and in unsuspected ways. Sobrino understands the historical reality of Jesus as Jesus' human existence and way of living in the world. According to him, this fundamental idea has received less attention and almost forgotten in most christological reflections. He criticizes what he calls the "sublime abstraction" of the images of Christ, which comes close to what I had referred to as the "absolutization of the (divine) image of Christ" in African Christianity, in the first chapter of this work. The result of this sublime abstraction, and "absolutization" as in the case of many African Christians, according to Sobrino, is that "Jesus is forgotten" in the traditional Christologies and in the image of Christ as "suffering servant" dominant in the popular religion in Latin America.²¹⁸ As a response to this forgetfulness, Sobrino argues that the notion, or rather the concrete reality of Jesus of Nazareth needs to be re-introduced and upheld. His way of doing this is first to distinguish between what he calls the "sublime title" of Christ as an adjective and the concrete reality of Jesus of Nazareth as a noun.²¹⁹ I find this a step which seems to me a thinly-veiled one, and which introduces an unnecessary separation in the one reality of Christ.²²⁰ I shall speak more about this separation in my critical evaluation of Sobrino's historical Christology in section 5 of this chapter.

At the same time, Sobrino maintains this conceptual and linguistic distinction, and goes further to elevate it theologically. The attempt to do the latter is what leads him to speak constantly of "the historical reality of *Jesus*." Simply put, the historical reality of

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 225. Emphasis in the original.

²¹⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 23. Emphasis in the original.

²¹⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 15.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ The separation is more obviously suggested where Sobrino discusses in various levels, "the relationship between Jesus and Christ." See Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 36-40.

Jesus means, in Sobrino's view, the concrete historical *life*, mission and purpose of Jesus, which, for Sobrino, ought to be described in terms of Jesus' poverty (in his relation to the Father and to others), his option for the poor (in his service to the Kingdom), and his praxis to promote their well-being as risen beings (in his call to discipleship).²²¹ Therefore, an analysis of Christ's identity and work, who he was and is, and what he did and does for the world, ought to be carried out in the light of "the presence of Christ now in our history."²²² This means Christ's ongoing presence in the concrete historical situations of human beings. These situations include the liturgy, the faith communities, and his presence among the oppressed.²²³

Associated with the historical reality of Jesus, and for a further understanding of what that means, Sobrino talks about "the constitutive historical relatedness of Jesus."²²⁴ He argues that "Jesus' transcendent trinitarian relatedness has to be supplemented by his historical relatedness."²²⁵ He explains his idea of Jesus' historical relatedness in "the fact that Jesus did not exist for himself, but had a reference point in the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom."²²⁶ This was the very ground and impulse of Jesus' own commitment, and subsequently, his call to discipleship that received the greatest impetus from the event of his resurrection. These aspects of the historical life of Jesus, namely: (a) Jesus' relatedness, or what Sobrino would more clearly underscore as Jesus' relationship with the Father, (b) Jesus' directedness to and service of the Kingdom, and (c) Jesus' call to discipleship, will form the main discussion in the next section that expounds the content of Sobrino's Christology. Let me emphasize that these three christological aspects come under "the essential moments that structured Jesus' life and the Spirit who animated it," as we shall see when we discuss the content of Sobrino's historical Christology in the second part of this section.²²⁷ The "most historical aspect of Jesus," his "practice (*praxis*) with the spirit," as Sobrino points out, offers a paradigmatic value for "how the creative following of Jesus" can (re)orient Christians to become more committed to practices that will bring about social change.²²⁸ This idea runs through the content of his Christology, to which I now turn.

²²¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 18.

²²² *Ibid.*, 22.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16. Recall the introductory remarks to "Jon Sobrino's Historical Christology," in this section where I mention Sobrino's prioritization of the concrete or historical particularity of Christ.

²²⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 16.

²²⁷ Valiente, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino," 659.

²²⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 67-192, Valiente, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino," 659. Also, Lisa Sowle Cahill has reflected on Sobrino's appeal to the historical aspect of Jesus and its significance, especially in providing Christians "with the concrete normative reference points" for their understanding of Christ and Christianity, and in providing the source for their lives and commitment to global (social) justice. See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 167.

§ THE CONTENT OF SOBRINO'S CHRISTOLOGY

The content of Jon Sobrino's historical Christology could be read as covering the entire Christ-event and beyond, as we have already mentioned at the beginning of this section. His historical Christology, in particular, as expounded in the two volumes, in a unique style proper to Sobrino, deals with five aspects or themes which he presents within the framework of a single, continuous historical process of the life of Jesus Christ. These are: (1) the life and activity of Jesus, (2) the suffering and death of Jesus, (3) the resurrection of Jesus, (4) the New Testament witness to him as the Christ, and finally, (5) the conciliar formulation of Jesus's identity and work as true God and true man. These five aspects make up what Sobrino refers to as "the most historical aspect" of Jesus, which is his "practice with Spirit."²²⁹ Sobrino describes this singular, distinctive dimension – the historical-earthly life of Jesus – as "absolutely central."²³⁰ And that it "constitutes a positive value as starting point for Christology."²³¹ Valiente rightly interprets it as the "fundamental moment in the overall structure of Jesus' existence" because of the emphasis on praxis as its truest expression.²³² I should also add that more to the emphasis on praxis is Sobrino's disavowal of christological deism and his insistence on the view of Jesus as a historical reality – history understood as ongoing. It is from this point of view that the emphasis on praxis is reinforced.

To deal with all the five themes of Sobrino's historical Christology will be beyond the scope of this inquiry, since I do not presume to offer a research investigation into Jon Sobrino and his Christology *per se*. For the purposes of this study, I shall rather focus only on the first theme – that deals with the life and activity of Jesus – and its three elements. The three elements are: (1) Jesus's relationship to God-the-Father, (2) Jesus' service to the Kingdom of God, and (3) Jesus' call to discipleship.²³³ Nevertheless, as I discuss these three, insights from other aspects of the historical Jesus, especially the reality of his suffering and death on the cross, and his resurrection, are incorporated in one way or another. I have already undertaken this incorporation of the other aspects. I did that, for instance, in chapter one, where in my engagement with the New Testament witness to Christ, and the creedal profession of faith in Christ as true God and true man, I also drew on insights from Sobrino. And I did that in my modest effort to re-connect the narratives of the images of Christ in African Christianity to the prime sources of christological faith.

There is a very important point that is worth highlighting within the context of the analysis of the first aspect of Sobrino's historical Christology. The point helps us to begin drawing out the meaning of Jesus' life and, especially, the possibility of its import for life today in the social sphere. One could safely say that Sobrino's historical Christology is as

²²⁹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 50-51.

²³⁰ Sobrino, "Jesus of Galilee from the Salvadoran Context," 459.

²³¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 50.

²³² Valiente, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino," 663. For the idea that "the truest expression of humanity's religious history is that *praxis* which promotes human well-being," and as one of the framework within which the understanding of (the history of) Christ and Christianity must be developed, see Terrence Merrigan, "The Historical Jesus in the Pluralist Theology of Religions," in *The Myriad Christ*, ed. T. Merrigan and J. Haers, 65.

²³³ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 6.

profoundly pneumatological as it is praxeological – hence, his emphasis on Jesus’ praxis with spirit. In speaking about the historical reality of Jesus Christ, his personality and work, Sobrino prioritizes Jesus’ practice with spirit as its “most historical aspect.”²³⁴ He contends that this emphasis brings together in a single track of thought, the various dimensions of Jesus’ life and mission. Let us consider Sobrino’s words at length here:

“My thesis is that the most historical aspect of the historical Jesus is his practice and the spirit with which he carried it out. By “practice” I mean the whole range of activities Jesus used to act on social reality and transform it in the specific direction of the Kingdom of God. The “historical” is thus primarily what sets history in motion, and this practice of Jesus, which in his day set history in motion is what has come down to our time as a history set in motion to be continued....Therefore, the historical dimension of Jesus does not mean what is simply datable in space and time, but what is handed down to us as a trust for us to pass on in our turn. This implies treating the texts of the New Testament in general and the Gospel texts in particular as narratives published to keep alive through history a reality started off by Jesus. This reality, after the resurrection, is responsible for passing on faith in Christ, but in terms of Jesus’ own words, discipleship, considered primarily as a continuation of his practice.”²³⁵

Sobrino makes these remarks, not only in order to restore or reify the historical character of Jesus, and to save it from being understood just merely in a positivistic sense, but also to maintain the ‘metaphysical’ import of the life and work of Jesus. Hence he begins with the reference to the “spirit” as the core element of understanding the historical identity and mission of Christ. But the spirit, for Sobrino is not in terms of “pure-inwardness.”²³⁶ It is manifested as practice, “within which Jesus was challenged and empowered.”²³⁷ The practice, according to Sobrino, consists in “the honesty with the real, fidelity to the real, and openness or letting oneself to be guided by the ‘more’ of reality.”²³⁸ By “the real” he simply means the historical, social reality of human beings. That is why Sobrino identifies the spirit of Jesus entirely with his practice. The spirit, he strongly opines, “was not merely the necessary accompaniment of Jesus’ practice, but shaped it, gave it a direction and even empowered it to be historically effective.”²³⁹ There is a problem with this insistence. It has to do with a certain tendency to present the spirit not in a personal or relational term, but merely as a force from without. I shall treat this issue in due course (in subsection 5.4).

Sobrino does not explicitly refer to the Gospel of Luke here in his presentation of Christ’s personality and work as the practice with the spirit. However, it is not far-fetched nor beyond reach to see that Sobrino takes a clue from the christological declaration in the fourth chapter of Luke’s gospel (Lk 4:16-19). There, Christ announces his ministry as taking off from *the* Spirit and the commissioning (for practice) by the same Spirit. We can

²³⁴ Ibid., 50-51.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid., 52

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid. See also Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, 14-20; Idem, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” 236-241. Two secondary sources are particularly helpful for understanding further and in appropriating Sobrino’s idea of “the practice with spirit.” Todd Walatka, “Uniting Spirituality and Theology: Jon Sobrino’s Seeking Honesty with the Real,” 79-84; and Ernesto Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino,” 664-680.

²³⁹ Ibid.

also trace the line of its inspiration to the Ignatian spiritual exercise that places high premium on the role of the Spirit. Thus, the emphasis on the spirit gives Sobrino's historical Christology and its aim, a certain directed characterization. I have touched on this idea when I described his Christology as a unique kind of spirituality. I may still add here that its aim is to inspire a certain *disposition* in the followers of Jesus Christ. The disposition is to live like Christ, and to become committed like him in engaging, confronting, and transforming reality.²⁴⁰ And in so doing, the believer continues to make "historically effective" the transformative practices of Jesus himself.²⁴¹

There is a further observation to be made about this dimension of Jesus' life as provided in Sobrino's Christology. In his analysis of the reality of Jesus of Nazareth, Sobrino underscores the fact that there is a certain very fundamental orientation in Jesus' understanding of himself and of his mission. According to Sobrino, "Jesus did not make himself the focus of his preaching and mission."²⁴² He rather "knew himself, lived and worked *from* something and *for* something."²⁴³ Sobrino adopts these principles of "from" and "for" to describe the life of Jesus as one of outward-directedness – as always being "directed to something very different and distinct from himself."²⁴⁴ This outward or other-directedness of Jesus' life and ministry grows from the "relatedness of Jesus."²⁴⁵ In other words, the relatedness of Jesus – to the Father and to other people – gives rise to and conditions his directedness to the reality of God's Kingdom and the realities of God's children. In this view, praxis then becomes the basic form, the out-working or, better still, the acting-out of this personal relatedness and outward directedness of Jesus' life and mission. From this train of reasoning, Sobrino contends that, Jesus' call to discipleship becomes the very act that establishes and furthers the ongoing experience of this relationship with God, and the commitment to the course of the Kingdom.²⁴⁶ As Sobrino puts it, discipleship is primarily considered as the continuation of Jesus' practice, which is revealed foremost in his relationship with the Father, and in his directedness to the Kingdom.²⁴⁷ We begin the discussion of this christological structure in Sobrino's appropriation of the identity and mission of Christ with the first element – Jesus' relationship with the Father.

²⁴⁰ "Disposition" is a central theological and existential concept in Sobrino's historical christology. See Valiente, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in the Theology of Jon Sobrino," 660-663.

²⁴¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 51. See also Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People: The Contextual Christology of Sobrino and Ellacuría," 359.

²⁴² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 67.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid. Recall our discussion of this principle under the subsection on the influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Sobrino's historical Christology. See subsection 2.3.1., *supra*.

²⁴⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 45.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 51

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

3.4. Jesus' Filial Relationship with the Father

3.4.1. A Theo-Relational Knowing²⁴⁸

For Sobrino, the primary, crucial aspect of Jesus's historical reality is his *relationship* with "God-Father".²⁴⁹ This aspect is a significant dimension within the entire context of Jesus's life, faith and mission. It is the viable point of reference and source for understanding who Jesus Christ is, the meaning of his life in and for the world. It was Jesus' need, like every other human person's need, "to find and give meaning" to his life, mission and entire history.²⁵⁰ And this quest for meaning in Jesus, writes Sobrino, "was undoubtedly religious."²⁵¹ Jesus expressed and embodied the meaning in the ultimate realization that "what underpins reality and the commitment to transform it, is not an absurdity, but something positive; and that this something positive is not an impersonal force, but something good and personal."²⁵² That something *is* someone, a living reality, a person who is, first and foremost, a relational Being. This Being is worth relating to, and can only be known by the way of relationship with him. In Jesus, says Sobrino, it is a God whom he knew, addressed, and related to, as *Abba* – Father.²⁵³ To be sure, this way of referring to God as Father by Jesus, differs from the way in which it was possible to identify God in the Old Testament.²⁵⁴ It is a referent that obviously bespeaks something of the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father.

There is something more to this theo-relational knowing of Jesus than just the quest to give *meaning* to his life, to his mission, and to the whole of history and reality. According to Sobrino, "the Gospel leave no room to doubt the radical *experience* Jesus had of God...is something absolutely central to his life and mission."²⁵⁵ This experience of Jesus in his relation to the Father is based on the fact that Jesus "as a true human being, had to interact with God, seek and dialogue with God, question and rest in God, open himself up to God and let God be God."²⁵⁶ What this means is that Jesus' being *is* in virtue of his relationship

²⁴⁸ I am indebted to Jacques Haers from whom I first heard of the coinage "Theo-relational." He employs it within the context of his description of the Christian existence and living as a way of knowing and believing that is not simply epistemological, but profoundly experiential. A sense of this understanding could be read in between the lines of a 2003 essay by Haers. The essay is entitled "*Defensor vinculi et conversationis: Connectedness and Conversation as a Challenge to Theology*," in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, 1-40. An excellent theological treatment of the theme of "relationship" in the reflection about the being of God in connection to Jesus' identity and mission, and the existence of every human person, is offered in the same volume. It is in the essay by Kristof Struys entitled, "Relationship in God and the Salvation of Humankind: The Thought of Walter Kasper," 227-238. According to Struys, the relational dynamism and exchange which constitute the very being of the Trinity is uniquely expressed in the historical reality of Jesus Christ. Christ embodies the eternal relatedness, the divine relationship which is the ground of every other human relationship.

²⁴⁹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 135.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 135-136

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 135. *Idem*, *Christ the Liberator*, 101.

²⁵⁴ For a very fine biblical and systematic-theological treatment of this idea, see, Terrence Merrigan and Bénédicte Lemmelijn, "From the God of the Fathers to God the Father: Trinity and Its Old Testament Background," *Louvain Studies* 31 (2006): 175-195.

²⁵⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 135. Emphasis mine; *idem*, *Christ the Liberator*, 101.

²⁵⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 135; *idem*, *Christ the Liberator*, 88-89, 93.

with the Father, or to put it radically, of his being and whole existence *in* God. Lassalle-Klein makes the point that it is crucial to first understand this line of thinking in Sobrino's interpretation of Jesus' life and mission. To Lassalle-Klein, it is the fact, in line with Sobrino's view, that, "Jesus' relationship with the Father ultimately guides and motivates the nature of his obedient service to God's call to initiate his Kingdom, which is historicized through a liberative prophetic practice that leads to Jesus's faith-filled death on the cross."²⁵⁷ Sobrino himself makes the point:

"Taking Jesus' special relationship with God and his special relationship with the Kingdom of God together, it is reasonable to suggest that the question of who Jesus is and the answer to this will include his being related in a very special way to ultimate reality and that, therefore the disciples had to relate to him in a way different from how they related to other people."²⁵⁸

Having said that, Sobrino, however, admits there are difficulties in the task of examining Jesus's relation to the Father. The difficulties include the human limitation in trying "to put God into words," that is, "the impossibility of grasping God," and the impossibility of penetrating "Jesus' inner psychology."²⁵⁹ These difficulties notwithstanding, Sobrino insists that Jesus' relationship with the Father "made a deep impression on the people and on his disciples, so much so that the Gospels have retained important signs of it."²⁶⁰ In other words, "Jesus' *relationship with God* is borne witness to in the Gospel," in such a manner that it could still be explored, Sobrino succinctly asserts in his *Christ the Liberator*.²⁶¹

He then makes the important point that, the relationship of Jesus with the Father, which consists in a certain kind of *knowing*, is not about a conceptual realization about God the Father's personality, something that is not graspable "from a strictly conceptual viewpoint."²⁶² As God is "the hardest reality to put into words," Jesus' knowledge of him must have been on the level of *relation* rather than conception.²⁶³ Thus, Jesus' relationship with the Father is essentially a form of "theo-relational knowing." It is a knowing that is by participation in and with, rather than an observation of a being from a point of separation or distance. It is a subject-to-subject instead of subject-to-object knowing – a knowledge that "Jesus progressively integrated into his life existentially."²⁶⁴

"Jesus faced up to an ultimate reality that he called "Father" and this father is always the ultimate for Jesus, that is "God". Father because of the absolute trust Jesus reposed in the ultimate as father, and because of his complete openness to this Father. God is father and he lets his heart rest in him. The personal ultimate for Jesus is, then, God-Father, and his relationship with him is one of trust-availability. For Jesus, God was,

²⁵⁷ Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People," 365.

²⁵⁸ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 101.

²⁵⁹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 135, 137.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁶¹ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 101. Emphasis in the original.

²⁶² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 137.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

and to an increasing degree, a supremely dialectical reality: absolute intimacy and absolute otherness.”²⁶⁵

In these words, Sobrino sums up the meaning of Jesus’ relationship with the Father, a fundamental theme in his analysis of Jesus’ most historical reality. He also suggests, according to Gloria Schaab, “that the relationship between Jesus and the God whom he called Father was, throughout Jesus’ life, a balance of mystery and intimacy.”²⁶⁶ “The ‘infinite distance’ of the incomprehensible God was, by all Gospel accounts, accompanied by the absolute closeness of the God whom Jesus called *Abba*.”²⁶⁷ Sobrino presents the paradox of the “infinite distance and absolute closeness,” which characterizes Jesus’ relationship with God-Father in what he describes as a historical-theological frame. In this way, he establishes contextually and concretely the intelligibility of the account of Jesus’ relationship with the Father, while laying out further some of the dynamics of the relationship. Much more will be said about these insights in the next subsection.

3.4.2. *The Historical-Theological Frames of the Relationship*

Sobrino further analyses Jesus’ relationship with the Father from four perspectives: prayer, trust, openness, and faith. He describes them as the “outer expressions of Jesus’ basic inner attitude.”²⁶⁸ These elements of Jesus’ life with the Father are what we shall discuss in this subsection.

Beginning with Jesus’ prayer, in which he primarily addressed himself to God as Father, Sobrino fleshes out the nature of Jesus’ relationship with God. For Sobrino, Jesus’ prayer is the primary *locus* for transforming reality. Jesus’ experience of prayer forms the natural consequence of his (the) new manner of referring to God as Father. Sobrino underlines the fact that Jesus’ way of praying was not mechanical. Rather, his way of praying is basically putting himself before God and allowing God to come before him.²⁶⁹ In this way, because Jesus’ incarnate prayer functioned as the *space* of activating his relationship with God, such prayer became his way of “responding and corresponding to God.”²⁷⁰ It was “a matter of listening to God’s word and putting it into effect, which is what Jesus’ whole life consisted of.”²⁷¹ From this perspective, says Sobrino, Jesus would condemn every form of mechanical, vainglorious, hypocritical, and alienating prayer.²⁷² He refers to a number of passages in the Gospels in order to flesh out the point of Jesus’ prayer as a space for his relationship with the Father. Sobrino further reflects on how these passages point also to the experience of prayer among the earliest witnesses of Jesus. These Christian communities were, according to Sobrino, like Jesus, conscious of “the numberless

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁶⁶ Gloria L. Schaab, “Jon Sobrino: The God of Solidarity,” in *The Creative Suffering of the Triune God: An Evolutionary Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 135.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 140. See also Jon Sobrino, “The Prayer of Jesus and the God of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels,” *Listening* 13 (1978): 189-213.

²⁷⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 140; *idem*, *Christ the Liberator*, 92.

²⁷¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 140.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 139.

ways in which prayer can be spoiled: spiritual narcissism, vanity and hypocrisy, verbosity, alienating and oppressive manipulation.”²⁷³ The same deficiencies of prayer can be detected today in many Christian Churches in Africa. There prayer is ‘used’ as an instrument of placating, instead of engaging and changing the realities that undermine human living in the context (see subsection 3.2. of chapter one on the limitations of the christological narratives in African Christianity).

“Trust in a God who is Father and openness to a Father who is God” are the next historical-theological frames for capturing the nature of Jesus’ relationship to God.²⁷⁴ According to Sobrino, it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus placed his trust in God. This means that Jesus experienced God “as being really good to him, as is sealed by the term in which he addresses God: *Abba*.”²⁷⁵ This fact, Sobrino states, is not something that is as simple as it appears. Sobrino claims it is of great significance; “it means that the ultimate definition of God is not power, nor thought, nor judgment, but goodness.”²⁷⁶ Jesus is convinced that God is good to him and to all beings. Jesus’ experience of God’s goodness is what sets him free, and accounts for his total availability to God and goodness to other people.²⁷⁷ This trust explains the idea of ontological security and the reciprocity in love that is seen in Jesus’ life and in his relation to other human beings. The expression of this security in love and trust is seen in Jesus’ unreserved divine self-donation or self-giving for the life and well-being of others in every event of encounter. Jesus’ relationship with the Father is designed to include other and every human being. By the fact of his total dependence on the goodness of the Father, which is a hallmark of his relationship with the Father, Jesus wishes to incorporate every human being. That is to say, there is an intention to include all in the intimacy he shares with the Father. For as he prayed: “I am not asking on behalf of them alone, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me...that all of them may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you. That they also may be in us (Jn 17: 20-21).

With regard to “Jesus’ openness to a Father who is God,” Sobrino observes that, “Jesus’ relationship to the Father was one of complete closeness, but not of possession.”²⁷⁸ The closeness is one by which “Jesus lived his creatureliness in depth: having to be referred to God without being able to seize the pole of that reference.”²⁷⁹ That is why, for Sobrino, Jesus’ openness to God is expressed in his obedience to God. This obedience is to be understood as “a fundamental and foundational attitude” of Jesus’ life, and which does not consist in mere fulfilment of divine precepts nor as an achievement of moral perfection. Jesus’ obedience to God is at a deeper level, according to Sobrino, his “going out of himself toward God, an emptying out of himself and a going out time and again against himself.”²⁸⁰ In this and in doing so, “Jesus also partook of the human condition, and this was very much

²⁷³ Ibid., 139-140.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 146-147.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 142; idem, *Christ the Liberator*, 101.

²⁷⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 142,

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 145-146.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 147-154, at 147.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 147

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

present in his theological relation to the Father.”²⁸¹ A relation that consists, simply put, in ‘letting God be God.’²⁸² In the final analysis, Jesus’ experience of God in such profound and personal way did not diminish his sense of God as mystery, rather the trust and openness to God enhanced it. This is so much the case that, the “mystery of God goes on being mystery eternally.”²⁸³ This mystery provides the ground and dynamism of Jesus’ faith – the next and final historical-theological frame of Jesus’ relationship with God.

Sobrino admits that the reference to “Jesus’ faith” sounds shocking since it is almost obvious that Jesus as the Son of God, as God himself, would not need to have faith in God. However, he goes on to justify why we need to talk of Jesus’ faith. For him, it is important for a proper understanding of “the truly human nature of Jesus,” as faith is “the basic depth of humanity.”²⁸⁴ Above all, Jesus’ faith “show what true faith should be for human beings.”²⁸⁵ Drawing on insights from Balthasar’s article *Fides Christi* and the exegetical writings of Walter Thüsing on “Jesus as the believer,” Sobrino argues that, “Jesus’ faith is the key to understanding not only his earthly life, but also Christology and all theological subjects.”²⁸⁶

The faith of Jesus, according to Sobrino, was his mode and ground of being.²⁸⁷ It derives from Jesus’ experience that “God is someone to whom, in the final analysis, human beings have to relate in faith, and for its part, faith can be reposed only in God.”²⁸⁸ In this sense, faith is not an added ‘extra’ from without, but an inmost aspect of what it means that Jesus is the Son of God, and is characteristic of his way of being the Son of God. Thus, faith forms part of what Sobrino describes as the innermost life of Jesus and of his filial relationship with a God-Father.²⁸⁹ In fact, Jesus’ faith is his being. It is his life. And this life which is the faith of Jesus has its basic component in Jesus’ exercise of “mercy toward (his) brothers and sisters.”²⁹⁰ This fundamental orientation of Jesus’ faith, Sobrino says, allows us to hold together “Jesus’ special relationship with God and his special relationship with the Kingdom of God.”²⁹¹ The former, Jesus’ relationship with the Father, is the inherent dynamism for the latter, Jesus’ directedness to God’s Kingdom of love and mercy. This outward, christomorphic flow in Jesus leads us then into our next discussion of the second defining theme of the most historical aspect of Jesus’ earthly life and mission – his directedness to the Kingdom of God.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid., 154.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 155.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. In the second volume of his historical Christology, Sobrino offers a succinct definition of faith as “trust and openness-availability to something that is held to be ultimate reality.” See Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 99.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 154. Similar idea is expressed by Edward Schillebeeckx in his claim that, “Jesus’ ‘original Abba-experience’ provides the source and secret of his life, message and praxis.” See Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx, Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, vol. 6, trans. John Bowden (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 227-240.

²⁸⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 154.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 156.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 157.

²⁹¹ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 99-101, at 101.

3.5. Jesus' Directedness to the Kingdom of God

At this point, I wish to introduce a second element in speaking about the historical reality of Jesus Christ. Sobrino prioritizes Jesus' directedness to the kingdom of God in order to underscore the praxis-dimension of Jesus' existence and activity, that "practice with spirit." According to Sobrino, it is the aspect of "the constitutive historical relatedness (of Jesus) to the Kingdom of God."²⁹² In this light, Sobrino says that the directedness to the Kingdom of God is characterised by the expectation of its imminent coming and in the "overall and absolute transformation of reality."²⁹³ It is "the final reality," "the central theme," the heart of Jesus' message – the reference to the Kingdom of God.²⁹⁴ For Sobrino, Jesus' commitment to the Kingdom, still within the space of his relationship to his Father and to other people, is the definite, historical manifestation of who God is, what he does, and how he acts. For "the Kingdom explains God's being *Abba*."²⁹⁵

In a relevant passage, which splendidly elucidates the idea we are striving to understand here, Walter Kasper (whose ideas Sobrino also engages in his own work) explains:

"This thing which God alone can provide, which God ultimately himself is, is what is meant by the Kingdom of God. It involves the meaning of God's being God and Lord, which at the same time means the humanity of human beings and the salvation of the world because it means liberation from the forces of evil which are hostile to creation, and reconciliation in place of the implacable antagonisms of the present world."²⁹⁶

Kasper goes on to explain (as much as Sobrino would say) that, this is the "fundamental theme of Jesus' message and the basic mystery of his person."²⁹⁷ It also means "that the message of the imminent Kingdom of God is a fundamental concept in Christology."²⁹⁸ The task that follows is to present in a systematic line of thinking, how Sobrino himself expounds and argues this view in his historical Christology.

In order to explore the three dimensions of this second element of Sobrino's appropriation of Jesus' earthly life and mission, I shall follow the pattern set out by Lassalle-Klein, but with my own spin on the content and its applications to the African Christian and christological contexts. The pattern is obviously in line with the three moments in Ellacuría's historicization of reality that we have discussed.²⁹⁹

²⁹² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 16.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁹⁶ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 61-62. For Sobrino's engagement with Kasper's understanding of what the Kingdom is, see *Jesus the Liberator*, 120-121.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ See the discussion of the three moments under the subsection 2.4.1.c. of this chapter on "Ignacio Ellacuría's Christian Historical Realism: History and Historicization."

3.5.1. The Kingdom Primarily Addressed to the Poor

Sobrino claims his own “specific” understanding of the Kingdom of God differs from what he considers as the “universalizing abstraction” of the Kingdom that is found in most modern Christologies. The Christologies of scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Walter Kasper.³⁰⁰ Clearly, it is beyond the scope of my presentation here to show precisely how Sobrino seeks to engage with each of these thinkers. My interest is rather to see what Sobrino identifies as the “decisive perspective” in understanding the meaning of God’s Kingdom.³⁰¹ He identifies three ways in which the Kingdom of God could be understood. They are the “notional way,” the “way of the addressee,” and the “way of the practice of Jesus.”³⁰² Sobrino says that the first way is “the one most commonly used in theology.”³⁰³ I have already mentioned certain Christologies which Sobrino identifies as offering mainly a notional understanding of the Kingdom of God.

He then turns to the second way, the way of the addressee, and argues that it is “the one way of finding out what the Kingdom of God means and might consist of.”³⁰⁴ For Sobrino, “it means that the Kingdom of God has specific addressees, and is so in order to be essentially partial.”³⁰⁵ Sobrino judiciously explains that the kingdom “is primarily addressed to the poor.”³⁰⁶ He claims that this is so on the basis of the Gospels; and that there is a “logical consideration” also for it to be so. This is how he expresses the argument: “[I]f the Kingdom of God is “good news,” its recipients will help fundamentally in clarifying its content, since good news is something essentially relational, not all good news being so in equal measure for everyone.”³⁰⁷ Sobrino then goes on to say that since the Kingdom is the good news of joy and hope to the poor, it means that the Kingdom of God ought to fulfil the longing of the poor for “basic life.” Therefore “the Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of basic life,” Sobrino avers.³⁰⁸ It is a Kingdom which Jesus himself teaches and demonstrates that it ought to be a Kingdom of life. Sobrino argues that it is in this way of understanding the Kingdom of God that the good news is kept *real*.³⁰⁹

“...[P]roclaiming good news to the poor of this world cannot be a matter of words alone, since they have had more than enough of these. Good realities are what the poor need and hope for. And this is what “bringing good news” means in both Isaiah (61:1-2) and Luke (4:16-30). It will only be *good* news to the extent that it brings about the liberation of the oppressed...the transformation of the social situation of many who long not only to hear but experience in their concrete lives the good news.”³¹⁰

³⁰⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 110-121.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 69-70.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 82-84.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 79-82.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 84-86.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 86-87. Emphasis in the original.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

For the Kingdom of God to become *the* source and ground of fulfilling the longings, expectations, and hopes of the poor, within the larger “cosmo-theological” frame of a transformed reality, Sobrino says that the Kingdom ought to provoke hope, requires conversion, and very importantly, demands “messianic practice” capable of historicizing the spirit of Jesus.³¹¹ To flesh out this idea he then offers an extensive treatment of the third way, “the way of the practice of Jesus,” which he also describes as the way of Jesus’ messianic practice.³¹²

3.5.2. *By Way of Jesus’ “Messianic Practice”*

While the first moment in considering Jesus’ directedness to or service of the Kingdom is that of “understanding” (i.e., the noetic moment), the second is the ethical. According to Sobrino, the emphasis of this second moment is “practice”, which refers to “Jesus’ various activities.”³¹³ The reference to Jesus’ practice helps to first, “establish what the Kingdom of God meant for him.”³¹⁴ Jesus’ responsibility for the Kingdom is not just in terms of a reality to be hoped for, or simply to expect “without doing anything practical about it; in which case all human beings could do was to pray for it to come.”³¹⁵ Sobrino says this is a limited understanding of the Kingdom. He rightly maintains that, as seen in the Gospels, Jesus not only proclaims the Kingdom but also – even in the act of proclamation – performs actions which bring about and testify to the same Kingdom. In other words, each time Jesus spoke of the Kingdom, there was always an accompanying action.³¹⁶ Sobrino then surmises that, “in *kingdom* terminology, we can say that Jesus is both *proclaimer* and *initiator* of the Kingdom of God.”³¹⁷ What this means is that the Kingdom, Sobrino insists, “is not only a “meaning” concept – meaning hope – but also a “praxic” one, implying putting meaning into practice.”³¹⁸ For him, it takes practice to initiate the Kingdom and even to understand properly what it is and means for human life.

For Sobrino, the “messianic practices” of Jesus are the means by which Jesus assumes ethical responsibility for Kingdom. He argues that, “Jesus’ messianic practice historicizes, (that is, makes real), his spirit of compassion, joy, forgiveness, courageous willingness to confront oppression and his call to personal and societal transformation.”³¹⁹ The practice includes “specifically his actions in working miracles, casting out devils and welcoming sinners, as well as his words in parables, and very importantly, his celebrations.”³²⁰ For the purpose of my discussion here, I shall focus on one aspect of Jesus’s messianic practice

³¹¹ Ibid., 161. Lassalle-Klein, “Contextual Christology of Sobrino and Ellacuría,” 361.

³¹² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 87-104.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

³¹⁶ Kasper says much the same thing: “Jesus did not work by words alone, but with actions. He did more than talk; he did things.” *Jesus the Christ*, 77.

³¹⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 87. Emphasis in the original.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 87-88.

³¹⁹ Lassalle-Klein, “Contextual Christology of Sobrino and Ellacuría,” 362.

³²⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 88.

that Sobrino discusses extensively, which is the miracles of Jesus.³²¹ This focus allows me to continue my critical engagement, particularly, with the limited and limiting imagination of Christ's identity, and the resulting attitude, of the vast majority of African Christians in their shared quest for social change.

There is no doubt that most of Jesus' actions are presented as miraculous. Their relation to the Kingdom of God are in the sense that "they are first of all "signs of the presence of the Kingdom."³²² Yet Sobrino, referring again to González Faus, rightly underlines the fact that miracles "are only signs; that, is, they do not bring an overall solution to oppressed reality."³²³ Even though miracles are "real signs of the approach of God, they "do not make the Kingdom real as structural transformation of reality."³²⁴ Rather "they are like calls for it, pointing in the direction of what the Kingdom will be when it comes."³²⁵ This point, as I stated above, is important to underline, especially for the sake of addressing the limited understanding of the many Christians, who invoke Christ as "miracle worker" in the broader African ecclesial-social setting.³²⁶ It would benefit majority of the African Christians, in the way of their christological proclamation and longing for societal transformation, to come to this right understanding.

At the end of Sobrino's discussion of the other aspects of Jesus' messianic practice, he concludes that the messianic practice of Jesus leads him to a "prophetic practice." I now turn to this element in what follows.

3.5.3. In His "Prophetic Praxis"

This is the third and final moment in Jesus' directedness and service to the Kingdom.³²⁷ Sobrino claims it consists in "the direct denunciation of the anti-Kingdom."³²⁸ According to him, the prophetic praxis of Jesus is what transforms "both Jesus' immediate context and the historical reality of Israel forever." It is the act by which "Jesus objectively faced up to the subject of society as a whole – including its structural dimension – and sought to change it."³²⁹ Lassalle-Klein explains it in a way that shows more clearly the distinction between Jesus' messianic practice and his prophetic praxis, and that elaborates more pointedly in

³²¹ In the first chapter, I underlined the fact that the confession of Christ as healer, liberator and king in the grassroots Christian communities happens mainly within the frame of the Christians' longing for miracles, in the places that have been described as "miracle centres." And that this longing for Christ's healing, liberating, and saving miraculous intervention is due to the Christians' understanding of his divine power. As I already referred to in chapter one, Lawrence Nwankwo engages this issue at length in his doctoral dissertation titled "From Power Christianity to Christianity that Empowers: Towards a Theology of Empowerment in the Nigerian Context." For an excellent synthesis of some of his ideas in engaging this religious phenomenon see also Lawrence Nwankwo, "'You have received the Spirit of Power...' (2 Tim. 1:7): Reviewing the Prosperity Message in the Light of a Theology of Empowerment," 56-77; idem, "African Christianity and the Challenge of the Prosperity Gospel," 11-27.

³²² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 88-89.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 89.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

³²⁶ See my discussion of this subject within the context of my examination of the image of Christ as healer in the grassroots Christian communities. Subsection 3.1.1 in the first chapter.

³²⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 160-179.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178-179, and cited in Lassalle-Klein, "Contextual Christology of Sobrino and Ellacuría," 363.

what the prophetic praxis consists. According to Lassalle-Klein, Sobrino considers that Jesus’ “messianic practice” produces “signs” of the Kingdom, even though it is not aimed at bringing about the radical transformation of society.³³⁰ While in Jesus’ prophetic praxis, he “denounces the scribes, the Pharisees, the rich, the priests, the rulers...who represent and exercise some kind of power that structures society as a whole.”³³¹ There is no refuting the fact that any effort at social transformation must take into account and address both personal and structural factors or dynamics. I think that this is the idea behind Sobrino’s distinction of Jesus’ messianic practices from his prophetic praxis. Where the former deals with actions that are person-oriented, the latter borders on actions that are directed to systems, structures, and institutions.

Referring to Sobrino, Lassalle-Klein further remarks that Jesus’ prophetic actions for the Kingdom “...(a) seek to reform and change the realities (the law, the Temple) in whose name a society is structured”; (b) expose structural abuses of institutional power as “an expression of the anti-Kingdom”; and (c) “show that the anti-Kingdom seeks to justify itself in God’s name.”³³² In this way, Lassalle-Klein goes on, “the prophetic activity of Jesus historicizes a spirit of transformative praxis because its purpose is the transformation of society.”³³³ For Sobrino, Jesus intends the ongoing historicization of this praxis. It will be by those, communities or individuals, who, like Archbishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr., will “share Jesus’ spirit of the service of the Kingdom.”³³⁴ This is what captures the essence, and realizes the prophetic and transforming potential of proclaiming and following Christ as his disciples, says Sobrino. This brings me to the third element in Sobrino’s appropriation of Jesus’ earthly life – his call to discipleship.

3.6. Jesus’ Call to Discipleship

Sobrino situates the discussion of Jesus’ call to discipleship within the context of his resurrection. In that regard, he approaches the subject of the resurrection, particularly with a focus on how it may always affect the lives of Christians and their commitment to the work of transforming societies.³³⁵ This owes to the fact that “the eschatological event of the resurrection was perceived in history and that it transformed the lives of Jesus’ disciples.”³³⁶ So, Christian discipleship, according to Sobrino, is “the very act of re-enacting as an ultimate value the practice of Jesus and his history.”³³⁷ In other words, all that we say and reflect on about the figure of Christ is made accessible through the life of Christian discipleship, Sobrino claims. “Outside discipleship we cannot have sufficient

³³⁰ Lassalle-Klein, “Contextual Christology of Sobrino and Ellacuría,” 362.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 161, as cited in Lassalle-Klein, “Contextual Christology of Sobrino and Ellacuría,” 363.

³³³ Lassalle-Klein, “Contextual Christology of Sobrino and Ellacuría,” 363.

³³⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 179. See also Lassalle-Klein, “Contextual Christology of Sobrino and Ellacuría,” 363.

³³⁵ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 12-13; Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in Jon Sobrino,” 675. See also Valiente, *Liberation through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino’s Christological Spirituality*, 143-152.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 54.

affinity with the object of faith to know what we are talking about when we confess Jesus as the Christ” or in whatever image we do so.³³⁸ Also, “put positively,” Sobrino goes on, it is “through the affinity produced by discipleship that it can be meaningful to proclaim Jesus as Christ, as the revelation of true divinity and true humanity.”³³⁹ Therefore, “confessing Jesus through one’s life is the most radical form of stating the *absolute* character of Jesus.”³⁴⁰ The driving questions in the light of these initial thoughts, which Sobrino says need to still be addressed more clearly are: how and from where does discipleship (as the “absolute expression of Christian life”) both of the earliest witnesses, and of the followers of Jesus today, receive this potency?³⁴¹ Besides, how precisely do they relate or give rise to the transformation of historical-social reality?

In answer, Sobrino argues that it is from the event of Jesus’ resurrection, understood and experienced as an *ongoing reality*. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the resurrection of humanity (cf. 2 Tim 2:11, Rom 6:8). And it remains the raising up of human beings into new state of being, which is marked by sharing in the life of Christ, following him, and enacting his practices.³⁴² The resurrection is the event by which is generated always “a way of being in the world that seeks to recreate Jesus’ life.”³⁴³ This would mean that discipleship, as Sobrino describes, entails “living the following of Jesus as risen beings.”³⁴⁴ He puts it pointedly: “the place for verifying – without alienation or self-deception – whether and in what way we are already and always sharing in the eschatological reality (the event of Jesus’ resurrection), is the following of Jesus and nothing else.”³⁴⁵ For that reason, Sobrino concludes, “the resurrection of Jesus, in its own reality, can be lived in the present, and within this present, specifically in the following of Jesus.”³⁴⁶

Be that as it may, Sobrino acknowledges that this christological fact of the mutual interdependence of Jesus’ resurrection (an eschatological reality) and his call to discipleship (as its immanent frame), bears enormous hermeneutical challenges and implications. He spends a chunk of time trying to deal with those concerns.³⁴⁷ What is of highest concern to me here, however, are the two closely related theological and existential

³³⁸ Ibid., 55.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 106. Emphasis in the original.

³⁴¹ Ibid. See also Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in Jon Sobrino,” 675.

³⁴² The same line of reasoning in which the resurrection of Christ is drawn upon for expounding the shape of Christian social engagement is put forward by Nicholas Fedorov whose ideas Miroslav Volf engages in his essay “‘The Trinity is Our Social Program’: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement.” For Volf, it is possible to think that the doctrine of the Trinity and other doctrines, particularly of Christ, offers a vision for structuring and transforming societies “because the resurrection of Christ is immanent to all human beings...and is not just an eschatological promise, but a present reality and therefore a historical program.” Miroslav Volf, “‘The Trinity is Our Social Program’: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 403-423, at 403. See also Erik Borgman, “Still Revealing Himself: How Jesus’ Resurrection Enables Us to Be Public Theologians,” in *Grace, Governance and Globalization*, ed. Stephan van Erp, Martin G. Poulson and Lieven Boeve (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 102-113.

³⁴³ Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in Jon Sobrino,” 663.

³⁴⁴ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 12.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 12-13.

³⁴⁷ See Sobrino, “The Hermeneutical Problem 1&2: The Resurrection, a Specific Problem for Hermeneutics,” in *Christ the Liberator*, 17-53.

implications of the idea.³⁴⁸ Sobrino himself considers them far more important in appropriating Christ for social transformation.

“The first is that Jesus’ resurrection should...be a reality that effectively affects history in its present, which supposes the possibility of living now as risen beings in history and the possibility of re-creating the experience of finality implied in the post-resurrection appearances. The second, more fundamental in the Third World (to which Africa, the context of the present research, is considered to belong), is understanding the resurrection in its essential relationship to the victims, so that the hope it unleashes should, above all, be hope for these victims in their longing for a transformed reality.”³⁴⁹

Consequently, in what follows, I speak of and will reflect further up on: (1) discipleship as the praxis of Jesus’ resurrection, and (2) discipleship, in the spirit of the resurrection, as the ground of hope for transforming historical-social reality.

3.6.1. Jesus’ Resurrection as Inner Driving Force of Discipleship

By discipleship as the praxis of Jesus’ resurrection, I draw attention to a fact emphasized by Sobrino himself: the resurrection of Jesus is made present to in a particular form – the following of Jesus, the commitment to live like him.³⁵⁰ The *Love* by which Jesus conquered death is also the ground of a life that is given in total dedication to God. Discipleship becomes then the act of participating in and witnessing to the power of love over every death-dealing order. It is a way of historicising the resurrection and saving it from any absurdity, Sobrino claims.³⁵¹ Sobrino attests to the fact that this idea is the product of his personal reflection about the resurrection of Jesus. At the same time, he contends the reflection emerges from a concentrated attention on the reality of the resurrection as the very act of Christ himself. The act by which Jesus seeks to, and in fact, does “impact all aspects of Christian discipleship.”³⁵² So, then, discipleship becomes “a way of being in the world that seeks to recreate Jesus’ life.”³⁵³ It is the way for actualizing Jesus’ practice in history, in every social situation.³⁵⁴ In this sense, Christian discipleship becomes the acting-out of the resurrection event and a continuation of the life of Christ – a life lived in the hope that is given by the Father’s loving vindication of Jesus’ life and mission.

Valiente, reflects further on this act of Christ, and, relatedly, of the Christian disciple, in the light of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. He writes: “Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances convey God’s forgiving love and function as commissioning events in which

³⁴⁸ See also, for example, See also, Thorwald Lorenzen, “Jon Sobrino: Resurrection and Justice,” in *Resurrection and Discipleship: Interpretive Models, Biblical Reflections, Theological Consequences* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 97-98.

³⁴⁹ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 12.

³⁵⁰ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 96-107. See also Sobrino, “The Resurrection of One Crucified: Hope and a Way of Living – Living in Accordance with Jesus’ Resurrection,” in *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*, 99-108, at 105-108.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁵² Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in Jon Sobrino,” 664.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 663.

³⁵⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 55.

the disciples are welcomed back into the community and entrusted with Jesus' reconciling (healing, liberating, and saving) mission."³⁵⁵ The practice of this mission, which is at the heart of Christian discipleship, according to Valiente, is "gratuitous and potentially transforming."³⁵⁶ In other words, a truly Christian act is, first and foremost, the action of Christ himself, *given* and freely performed. This is what makes the Christian act bear a transforming potential. For it is the act that has become charged with Christ's own action; and by that token, is the extension of Christ's historical action in the world. This close identification of the Christian with Christ himself, of course, has roots in the Scriptures. Christians are supposed to be temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), branches of the one vine (Jn 15:5), who at baptism are buried with Christ and rise with him (Col 2:12), sons and daughters of God in the Son (2 Cor 6:18). In this light, one must bear in mind the ontological difference, in which is underlined the fact that the unity of the actions of the Christian and Christ is by way of *imitatio Christi* or, *sequela Christi* (understood loosely as "following Christ"), to use the preferred phrase of Sobrino. I will return to this in the next section of this chapter, and a bit later in section three of the final chapter.

To recapitulate the idea, the transformation of our society, the realization of a new social order, is brought about by the way of discipleship. This is so, not simply as some sort of social activism, but also as the graceful out-working of the ongoing reality of Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection being the event in which he continues to act through the instrument of his divine humanity. What this means is that belief in Jesus' resurrection entails taking social reality and its transformation seriously. Doing so is a radical form of witness to hope – hope in Christ's transformation of a society that images his own life and victory.³⁵⁷

3.6.2. *The Act of Hope for a Transformed Reality*

For Sobrino, the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection is "the founding act" of hope for societal transformation.³⁵⁸ He considers that this is his own way of "expressing the relationship between resurrection and the present as radically as it should."³⁵⁹ According to Sobrino, the resurrection of Jesus "led Christians to think deeply about three things – truth, exaltation and hope."³⁶⁰ Of the third, he explains that by his resurrection, "Jesus becomes the symbol of the possibility of salvation, both already present and in the future."³⁶¹ This is because Jesus' life and his destiny "are not only his, but overflows in the direction of others" and their well-being.³⁶² It is this that makes the resurrection of Jesus, through the outpouring of the Spirit, already the event for the transformation of historical reality (social condition) in the present.³⁶³ The transformation is not simply by the way of "the Spirit

³⁵⁵ Valiente, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in Jon Sobrino," 674.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 41-42.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

becoming present in history through showy and powerful (charismatic) actions.”³⁶⁴ The kind we find in many Churches in Africa that privileges spiritual charisma. At the same time, Sobrino speaks of “building the structure of incarnation, mission, and taking on the burden of history in a risen manner – hope.”³⁶⁵ This “transformative engagement of historical reality,” rests on the promise of justice that is ushered in by the event of Jesus’ resurrection.³⁶⁶

It is only in the confrontation, engagement, and in seeking to transform social realities that one may believe in the resurrection. Sobrino echoes Bonhoeffer in this respect. The echo of the same idea is heard in a work by Rowan Williams. “It is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one may believe in the Resurrection and a new world.”³⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Williams himself expresses the idea in the following way: “To believe in the risen Jesus is to trust that the generative power of God is active in the human world; that it can be experienced as *transformation*, recreation and empowerment in the present; and that its availability and relevance extends to every human situation.”³⁶⁸ These reflections unite in a view upheld by Sobrino, with which I close this section. The view that Christian discipleship, as the proclamation and the praxis of Jesus’ resurrection, is an event that makes possible the comprehensive *act* of hope without which transformation is impossible. This view is based on the fact that the resurrection “introduces a hope into history, into human beings, into the collective consciousness, as a sort of life experience capable of giving shape to everything.”³⁶⁹

4. Sobrino’s Christology and Social Transformation

4.1. Retrieving a Christological Model: Christ the “Incarnate Divinity”

The study above, of Sobrino’s analysis of the historical reality (earthly life and mission) of Jesus Christ, indicates various strands which converge into a coherent whole, from within a discernible centre, or around an organizing core. Sobrino does not explicitly identify that centre in one strand, even though it runs through all his discourses, and could be gleaned from the way in which he appropriates the identity and work of Christ and the knowledges produced therein. *The synthesis is mine*. And it is important to do so in order to be able to fill out more systematically the connection between Christ, belief in him, and social transformation. This implies the retrieval of a christological scheme – an elaboration of which provides insights – that can help to (re)orient belief, attitude, and possible courses of action, which can bring about the transformation of society.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Valiente, “From Conflict to Reconciliation: Discipleship in Jon Sobrino,” 661, 674.

³⁶⁷ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 216. See also Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 340.

³⁶⁸ Rowan Williams, “Memory and Hope: Easter in Galilee,” in *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2002), 44. Emphasis mine.

³⁶⁹ Sobrino, “The Resurrection of One Crucified,” in *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 102.

³⁷⁰ Theologians have always grappled with the question of whether a christology committed to the transformation of societies need a model or norm. For a systematic exploration of such question, and with a considerable attention to Sobrino’s historical christology, see Russell Pregeant, “Christological Grounding for Liberative Praxis,” *Modern Theology* 5, no. 2 (1989): 113-132. Kathryn Tanner argues that one important

This also is in answer to one of the research questions posed at the beginning of this chapter within the overall economy of the present research: With what christological model can the image of Christ be critically appropriated in order to provide the resources of faith that could transform and (re)orient Christians to become more committed to practices that will bring about social change? Within the context of my critical engagement with Sobrino's historical Christology, I found a robust model of Christ's personality as "one with us." One with whom we enter into a relationship of life and love, who in turn transforms our personality, and from there, we are able to become like him in a transforming encounter with other human persons, and so, able to take on together, practices that bring about social change.

Sobrino's presupposition and orientation in appropriating the figure of Jesus Christ points to the model of Christ's existence as "incarnate divinity". An understanding of the model is seen from Sobrino's insistence that the core ideas which should guide christological thinking be established by the experience of Christ as one who has shared and still shares in the reality of humanity's social-theological situation. For Sobrino, Jesus lived and acted, and never stopped living and acting through the instrument of his humanity.

There is a theological premise of this understanding which is expressed by Thomas Hughson in his own attempt to connect Jesus to social justice.³⁷¹ Hughson states it this way: "All belief in and theology of Jesus Christ has an inherent structure and logic of movement from below to above," and back.³⁷² Joseph Drexler-Dreis says much the same: the Christian faith, he argues, is based on a "deductive principle of incarnate divinity," that is, the belief in and understanding of divinity as incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.³⁷³ The principle allows us always to connect Jesus to the historical reality; and in doing so, to continue the interrogation of social-historical realities.³⁷⁴

Diane Stinton speaks of the same model or "schema," as she calls it, when she describes the striking portrayal of Jesus in African art and imagination.³⁷⁵ The portrayal of Jesus in four scenes – nativity, baptism, Last Supper and Gethsemane – is depicted by one of Kenya's foremost artists, Elimo Njau. Referring to a personal comment of the artist at the end of her account of these scenes, Stinton underscores the fact that the schema of Christ as incarnate divinity is what lies at the heart of the belief that Christ became and is still

aspect of the project of systematic theology is to figure out that "organizing centre" around which a vision of what the Christian faith and commitment are about. Interestingly, for Tanner, that centre is "Christ's human way of life in the world" – the way of incarnate divinity. See Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, xiii, 1-33, 35. In her later work *Christ the Key*, Tanner says as matter-of-factly that, "the character of Jesus' relationships with other people is the better avenue for making judgements...about social matters." See Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 207-208.

³⁷¹ See Thomas Hughson, "Christological Solution: One Divine Person," in *Connecting Jesus to Social Justice: Classical Christology and Public Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 159-201. See also Anthony Atansi, Review of *Connecting Jesus to Social Justice: Classical Christology and Public Theology*, by Thomas Hughson, *Louvain Studies* 40, no. 1 (2017): 105-107.

³⁷² Hughson, *Connecting Jesus to Social Justice*, 159.

³⁷³ Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love*, 160.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Stinton, "Jesus – Immanuel, Image of the Invisible God," 10-22. See also Justin S. Ukpong, "The Immanuel Christology of Matthew 25:31-46 in African Context," in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, ed. John S. Pobe, 55-64; and Vhumani Magezi and Christopher Magezi, "Christ also Ours in Africa: A Consideration of Torrance's Incarnational, Christological Model as Nexus for Christ's Identification with African Christians," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1-12.

“‘one-of-us’, embracing the religio-cultural, political and ecological realities of the day.”³⁷⁶ Christ – the incarnate divinity – is one among us, dwelling among us in Africa (Jn 1:14).³⁷⁷ To speak of Christ as incarnate divinity, maintains Stinton, is to give credence to the fact that Jesus is “powerfully present and active in the lived experience of African Christians today.”³⁷⁸ Such assertions about the model of Christ’s existence as incarnate divinity are readily seen in many scholarly works on the meaning of Christ in Africa. However, there has not been any thoroughgoing systematic-theological rendering of their implications for life in the social order, which is what I intend to do both in the rest of this section and in the final chapter of this dissertation. So, what is novel are both my creative retrieval of the model and the social implications from it. Before I go on with the latter, let me fill out more on how the model has been presented in the works of other notable systematic theologians and in the devotional sources of the Christian tradition.

Rowan Williams also refers to the model when he talks of the “incarnate Christ” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christology lectures, which provide the framework for the latter’s *Ethics*. Williams’s explanation allows us to think of the model, not simply as a theological precept that has only a theoretical inference, but also as one that has a practical dimension and import. In this light Williams asserts: “Christ’s incarnate, divine identity is *nothing other* than ‘standing in for us, and this establishes that human life is in its essence a ‘standing in’ for one another.”³⁷⁹ Christian life is lived as “standing in the place where the other lives, so that we are vulnerable to what the other is vulnerable to; we are to risk what the other risks.”³⁸⁰ This entails the taking on of “representative responsibility,” the exercise of actions of solidarity that ground and bring about a transformed society. Such a way of thinking about the social implications of the christological model of incarnate divinity, and its realization is grounded on the fact that, “through his incarnation, the Son of God became consubstantial with humanity...and his resurrection was the resurrection of the whole of humanity into a new ontological state marked by participation in the divine life.”³⁸¹

Furthermore, the scheme of incarnate divinity reveals a divine principle, a logic – God *with us*. A mention of this christological datum, “God with us,” reminds me of a line in the hymn, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, an English Christmas carol that first appeared in 1739. It was adapted by George Whitefield in 1758 in a collection that is interestingly titled “Hymns for Social Worship.” In it the christological model is rendered in the phrase “incarnate deity.”³⁸²

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold him come,

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 13.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 29.

³⁷⁹ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 207. Emphasis in the original.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ See Miroslav Volf, “The Trinity is Our Social Program,” 403. With this idea, *supra*, Volf suggests that even the theological attempt to relate the doctrine of the Trinity to social engagement is based on the christological datum. The Incarnation remains our sole access to the Triune reality.

³⁸² See also Marguerite Shuster, “The Incarnation in Selected Christmas Sermons,” under the section titled “The Incarnation Practiced and Proclaimed,” in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, 373-396.

Offspring of a Virgin's womb!

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the *incarnate Deity*
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.³⁸³

With these explanations about the christological model of incarnate divinity in mind, we have now reached the point at which we can try to work out the almost radical theological-social implications of Sobrino's historical Christology, for the transformation of society. Thus, in the light of the model, I will be able to suggest the outlines of a christological perspective – knowing, being, and acting – for social transformation. That is to say, the christological model helps us to articulate more amply the terms of the relation between belief in Jesus Christ and the transformation of society. The model serves to enunciate life and socially transforming experiences, new understandings about the proclamation of Christ as the image and bringer of social transformation in the light of transforming relationships between Christ and believers, and among human beings themselves. Rowan Williams has expressed this perception splendidly:

“The finite reality of Jesus embodies infinite divine relatedness, and so its own humanly and historically generated relations are more than instances of routine finite relations: they have effect of extending and deepening human relations with God, so that the ‘filiation’ that characterizes Jesus is in some measure lived out in believers; and, connected with this, they establish between believers an organic interdependence that radically changes our involvement with and responsibility for others, inside and outside the visible community of faith.”

The point is this: Christ transforms our world (society) through the sheer fact of his own incarnate divinity. The implications of this densely insightful perspective about the christological model of incarnate divinity in relation to the Christian commitment to social transformation are what I shall unfold in the following subsections. I will do that drawing mainly from my analyses above of Jon Sobrino's historical Christology and other related systematic theological writings.

³⁸³ Reginald Jacques and David Willcocks, *Carols for Choirs, Fifty Christmas Carols*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). For an extensive theological discussion of this model of incarnate divinity by theologians that are referred to as “the deep incarnation theologians,” see the work by Niels Gregersen. Gregersen is considered “the father and main protagonist of the christological proposal of deep incarnation.” By deep incarnation, Gregersen and the contributors to the volume mean, “the idea that the flesh assumed in Jesus connects not only with all humanity, but also with all biological life, and the whole matrix of the material universe down to its very roots.” See Niels Gregersen, ed., *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015). For a fine contextualised and critical engagement with the work, see Jakub Urbaniak, “Extending and Locating Jesus's Body: Toward a Christology of Radical Embodiment,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 4 (2019): 774-797, at 776-782.

4.2. Insights for Connecting Christ and Christians to Social Transformation

The insights from Sobrino's analysis of the most historical aspect of Christ's life and mission can help us in plumbing the deeper meaning of the Christian life and commitment, and the christological resonance of societal transformation. For one, Sobrino's historical Christology, set within the context of his vision for the transformation of society, rests on the important fact that the human person and the society he or she inhabits are brought to fullest realization precisely in and through their union with the incarnate and incarnating Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus Christ. As a result, with the model of Christ's existence as the incarnate divinity, a much-needed clarity is brought to the three notions of Christian existence and commitment to social transformation as: (1) enhancing relationship with Christ and with others, (2) engaging the agency of the Christian, and (3) enacting the discipleship of Christ (that is, his being-*for-others*) through embodied practices of ecclesial-social solidarity. The implications of the three notions for the very heart of how we understand and speak of the Christian life, of societal transformation, and of Christian commitment to social transformation, are what I reflect on in what follows. For this purpose, I draw generously upon insights from my discussion of Sobrino's historical Christology, and from other works by him and other theologians, which help to shed light on the connections among Christ, Christians and social transformation. Let me mention again that I make the connections using the correlational method which follows the logic in the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*.

4.2.1. Jesus' Relation to the Father: Rethinking Christian Life

The model of Christ as incarnate divinity helps Sobrino to present, first and foremost, the meaning of Christ's personality in terms of his personal relationship with the Father, a relationship of first, intimate existence in the other, and then, of loving self-giving to the Father and to other human individuals. This has enormous implication for rethinking what it means to be a believer, a person and follower of Christ, at both the individual and communal level, on the one hand, and what it means for the Christian social engagement on the other. I will spell out the understanding of the Christian life in the light of this relationship in two ways – the Christian life as a relationship with Christ and the Christian life as a relationship with other human beings. Sobrino argues that it is from within the context of this twofold relationship that the Christian participates in and translates Christ's transforming work within the society. In fact, he considers the relationships as the *ground* of Christian commitment to bringing about the kind of transformation or change associated with Jesus in his own earthly life and mission.

a. A Transforming Personal Relationship with Christ

The transforming relationship with Christ is not only the achievement of individual will and psycho-relational prowess or know-how, but also, strictly speaking, a manifestation of grace. To be sure, one needs to *cooperate* with grace. What this means is that human effort and agency need to be emphasized as well. That said, the relationship is the experience in

which the mind, will, passion, and freedom of the human person, like those of Jesus, are brought to flourish in union with him, who is the incarnate and incarnating deity. As in Jesus' relationship with the Father, the Christian's relationship with Jesus is first a *gift* of God in Jesus Christ. This gift is the self-communication of the Father to his children in and through his Son. In this sense, the relationship is the initiative, and one could say, the 'ontological given' of the God-self, which is by the fact of our being created in the image and likeness of God. Hence we have the capacity to enter into relationship with God in Jesus Christ. As in Jesus' relationship with the Father, which unfolds and is manifested within what Sobrino describes as "the historical-theological frames," our own transforming relationship with Christ also thrives within the frames of prayer, trust, openness, and faith in God's loving mercy made manifest in Christ. Thus, the experience of relationship with Christ happens as an elevation of *grace*, and causes the Christian to live entirely for Christ and for the good of others.

The relationship with Christ is supposed to transform the Christian and impact in his or her own encounters with other human beings. The Apostle Paul transmits to us the same christological understanding: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the body I live in faith [relationship with] the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for my sake. And I cannot bring myself to give up this gift of God's grace."³⁸⁴ In the words of South African theologian, Albert Nolan:

"If we find it difficult to take Jesus seriously and to live as he lived, then it is because we have not yet experienced God as our *abba*. The experience of God as his *abba* was the source of Jesus' wisdom, his clarity, his confidence, and his radical freedom. Without this it is impossible to understand why and how he did the things he did."³⁸⁵

These ideas lead to a second defining aspect of relationship with Christ – relationships with other human beings.

b. Transforming Our Constitutive Relationships

In the light of the christological model of Christ as incarnate divinity, the Christian life is seen as consisting also in the loving relationship of a Christian with other human beings. This relationship is not simply in terms of the relational dimension and proclivity of the human person. Sobrino sees it as the necessary outcome or the fruit of the Christian's relationship with Christ, which enlarges the capacity of the Christian to encounter other human beings in a relationship of love and generous self-giving. In short, the Christian relationship with Christ, the first defining aspect of what it means to believe in Christ, leads of its own accord into the transformation of the constitutive relationships of the individual believer. In relationship with Christ, a believer learns how to relate with others and even the whole of God's creation. This is how a community of the Church and every human

³⁸⁴ See Galatians 2:20-21 (New Revised Standard Version and the Jerusalem Bible, Popular Edition). Bracket mine.

³⁸⁵ See Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2006), 10.

community, is formed, nurtured, and mobilized for the commitment to social transformation. Such a christological principle, therefore, must function as a central animating core for social transformation in Africa.

Sobrino would also describe this idea of a (Christian's) transforming relationship with others within the context of the modern quest for freedom.³⁸⁶ For Sobrino, this idea commends the understanding of freedom that stems from Jesus' own freedom. His and every human capacity to live "for the sake of the good of others."³⁸⁷ As he further expresses this idea: "The goodness of God – a form of the christological experience of Jesus' relationship with God – is what frees for goodness, and through this sets us free from ourselves, and for goodness towards others."³⁸⁸ "Free persons are those who have been set free, and this is the image Jesus puts forwards."³⁸⁹ "Loved in order to love."³⁹⁰ We can transpose these ideas for our purpose here by appreciating the fact that Christians are those who have been transformed in order to transform others. My being a Christian doesn't stop with me; it ought to overflow into my relationship with other people (cf. 1 Jn 4:11). This is a profoundly new way to think about what it means that I am a Christian, what it means that I am living a Christian life. It does not rest with my relationship with Christ. It has also to do with how this relationship flows into my relationship of daily life and in every event of encounter with others. Consequently, one must ask, how have I become transformed in order to transform others in a life of goodness towards them?

4.2.2. *Jesus' Service to the Kingdom of God: Re-imagining Societal Transformation*

I reflect here on how Sobrino's insights on Jesus's directedness to the kingdom of the Father provides a new understanding of the meaning of, and the commitment to, social transformation. In doing so, I suggest that the kingdom of God, and Jesus' directedness to it in history, correlates to the quest for a transformed society. This society is a manifestation of God's kingdom of justice, love, truth, peace and well-being. The reflection will be done also in the light of the twofold description of the kingdom of God by Sobrino. For him, "the Kingdom of God has two essential connotations: (1) that God rules in his acts, (2) that it exists in order to transform a bad and unjust historical-social reality into a different good and just one."³⁹¹ Thus, the work of societal transformation, like Jesus' service to the kingdom of God, according to Sobrino, "is a highly positive reality," a profoundly christological act and event.³⁹² Sobrino puts it this way: "[It] is the positive action through which God transforms reality and God's Kingdom is what comes to pass in this world when God truly reigns: a history, a society, a people transformed according to the will of God."³⁹³ As such, the historicization of Jesus' directedness or service to the Kingdom is in the

³⁸⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 145.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁹² *Ibid.*

³⁹³ *Ibid.* See also *Ibid.*, 89, where Sobrino states clearly that, "the Kingdom of God is made real as structural transformation of reality."

commitment to societal transformation as a christological *act*, and its realization, a christological *event*. These two closely related ideas now need to be fleshed out in some more detail.

a. Response to a Christological Imperative (Act)

Sobrino writes the Kingdom of God is understood by way of the poor and of Jesus' practice in serving the needs of the poor – their well-being, their longing for justice and freedom of life. Recall how these are the basic longings which inspire many Christians to imagine Christ their healer, liberator, and king. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus teaches and embodies, ought to be a Kingdom of life, the Kingdom that is a commitment to the realization of these needs. This is to say that the commitment to the human and social well-being of the God's children is at one and the same time, the commitment to the Kingdom of God. Thus, if the identity and work of Jesus unfolded and still unfolds within the context of the proclamation and response to the praxis-related demands of the Kingdom, the commitment to social transformation for the well-being of every person becomes a christological imperative. In other words, the involvement in actions that can bring about a more just social order is itself a christological act. That is why Sobrino boldly insists that, "unless we participate in the impatient longing for total redemption, and unless we participate in the transforming victories for our societies, we shall not adequately grasp the presence of Christ in history."³⁹⁴

This participation, moreover, demands certain habits. As Rowan Williams discusses, the habits of societal transformation like,

"...generosity, mercy and welcome are *imperatives for the Christian* because they are a participation in the divine activity; but they are also imperative because they show God's glory and invite or attract human beings to give glory to God – that is, to reflect back to God what God is."³⁹⁵

It is in the cultivation, or rather, the embodiment of such habits, and in living them out faithfully, that social transformation happens. Hence, we reason that the attainment of a transformed society, which guarantees the healing, well-being, and flourishing of every human person, is by the same token, the realization of a christological event – the event of Christ's self-giving for the life of the world.

b. Realization of a Christological Event

With Sobrino's model of Christ's existence as incarnate divinity, particularly in the light of Jesus' directedness to the Kingdom of God, we can speak of the transformation of society as a christological "event". An *event* is an occurrence or a set of occurrences that have consequences for the transformation of society. Social scientists such as William H. Sewell

³⁹⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 19.

³⁹⁵ Rowan Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics," 42. Emphasis mine.

presents much the same thing about social transformation as an “event”.³⁹⁶ According to Sewell: “Event is a sequence of occurrences that result in transformations of structures. Such a sequence begins with a rupture of some kind, which produces reinforcing ruptures in other locations, and these ruptures spiral into transformative historical and social events.”³⁹⁷ Here, the author speaks from a sociological point of view, yet for our purposes we can also make a christological sense of this idea.

Extending this concept, I consider that the transformation of African society is the realization of a christological event.³⁹⁸ Where the christological event provides the impulse for a “rupture,” or what transformation theologians describe as “disruptive transformation,” – “the concrete divine causality,” that leads to the ongoing transformation of society.³⁹⁹ What this suggests, or in fact means, is that the longing and quest for healing, human well-being, and social justice, in a word, for a transformed situation that gives rise to human flourishing, are the events of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. More simply put, the commitment to societal changes that are in line with the values of the Kingdom of God receives impulse from the grace of Christ’s own life and mission. Thus, social transformation is at the heart of God’s own move, what he had always wanted and still wants, made known in the God-act of giving of his Son to become human and to share in our human situation.⁴⁰⁰ It is God’s gift to humanity. As an *event*, in its christological sense, it is a gift that is given, not just once and for all, but over and time again until it is experienced by all God’s children in every place and time. By this token, the realization of a transformed society, which is the very desire of God, ought to be taken seriously, and not to be seen as simply political or social responsibility of a select group.

4.2.3. *Jesus’ Discipleship: Re-envisioning Christian Commitment*

Sobrino, it will be remembered, acknowledges that the historical reality of Jesus’ resurrection is the foundation for thinking of his call to discipleship. In the light of this fact, Sobrino surmises that the Christian life, by the mystery of divine filiation, has become so elevated that it could be understood and lived as acting in the place or role of Jesus of

³⁹⁶ William H. Sewell, Jr., “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Social Transformation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992): 1-29. See also William H. Sewell, “Historical Events as Transformation of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society* 25 (1996): 841-881, cited in Joseph Komonchak, “Experience and Event” in “Interpreting the “Event” of Vatican II,” in *The Contested Legacy of Vatican II: Lessons and Prospects*, ed. Lieven Boeve, Mathijs Lamberigts and Terrence Merrigan, LTPM 43 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 7-8.

³⁹⁷ Sewell, “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Social Transformation,” cited in Komonchak, “Interpreting the Event,” 8.

³⁹⁸ See also Orobator, “The Kingdom as a Symbol of Hope for Africa,” in “The Idea of the Kingdom of God in African Theology,” 354-356.

³⁹⁹ Sedmak, “The Disruptive Power of World Hunger,” in Davies, Janz, and Sedmak, *Transformation Theology*, 115-141, at 129. What Sedmak suggests is that social issues and tragedies like world hunger and the commitment to ending it is the outcome of a christological event that is also a disruptive reality like the tragedy itself. Such that a commitment to and the realization of God’s kingdom of justice for those who are hungry, for example, is a christological event.

⁴⁰⁰ Pope Francis upholds similar view when he rightly says that: “In the Christian understanding of the world (society), the destiny of all creation (social order) is bound up with the mystery of Christ, present from the beginning.” See Francis, “Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, *Laudato Si*, 24 May 2015,” (Citta’ del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 99.

Nazareth. In this way, the Christian commitment could be seen as the enactment of Jesus' discipleship, the praxis of his resurrection.⁴⁰¹ This commitment consists in "the following of Christ, the crucified one who transforms man himself and his situation."⁴⁰² This idea could be traced to Karl Rahner, whose influence on Sobrino's Christology I examined. Rahner describes the Christian commitment, first, as a participation in the life and death of Christ, and second, as "the concrete manifestation of love of neighbour, which always simultaneously manifests one's love for God."⁴⁰³

a. Solidarity as Being-*for*-the-other

Inscribed in Sobrino's understanding of Jesus's resurrection is an ontological-ethical imperative. By ontological-ethical imperative, Sobrino means that the event of the resurrection demanded and still demands a new way of being which *necessarily*, thanks to that defining relationship with Christ, gives rise to doing.⁴⁰⁴ The new way of being is not simply the kind of "being there" as a lump of flesh or material body as it were. It is a being that consists in "being for" the other, and further established by the actions that are performed on behalf and for others good.⁴⁰⁵ As Sobrino makes the point:

"The enactment of the faith of the individual Christian and of the Church essentially includes, naturally, "confession," but in it faith more often takes the form of "invocation": by being of such type and acting in such a way people confess the truth of Christ in whom they believe. This being and acting like Jesus that should characterize the Church is what Christology needs to pay attention to in order to get to know Jesus better and to collaborate with him in his work of transforming society."⁴⁰⁶

In his essay "Bearing With One Another in Faith: A Theological Analysis of Christian Solidarity," Sobrino upholds the view that solidarity is first and foremost the exercise of co-responsibility.⁴⁰⁷ It is the act of "loving co-responsibility among the members of the human family."⁴⁰⁸ For Sobrino, solidarity is the very act by which Jesus' humanity is realized. So, for humanity to be truly what it is created to be, is for it "to be in solidarity."⁴⁰⁹ To be human is to be in the mode of brother- and sisterhood.⁴¹⁰ "That is the way Christ has left us, and so salvation," which in Sobrino also means liberation and

⁴⁰¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 29.

⁴⁰² Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 29.

⁴⁰³ See Karl Rahner, *The Christian Commitment* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1970). The ideas receive a more concrete translation in Rahner's essay "Who are Your Brother and Sister?" in *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1987), 83-84, and as cited on page 229 of in Brian Linnane's article, "Dying With Christ: Rahner's Ethics of Discipleship," *The Journal of Religion* 81 (2001): 228-248.

⁴⁰⁴ See Sobrino, "Living in Accordance with Jesus' Resurrection," in *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 105-108.

⁴⁰⁵ Recall our discussion of Sobrino's understanding of goodness as a christological form of Jesus' relation to God whom he experienced for His goodness to him. See the discussion in section 3.4.2.

⁴⁰⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 30.

⁴⁰⁷ Jon Sobrino, "Bearing with One Another in Faith: A Theological Analysis of Christian Solidarity," in *The Principle of Mercy*, 144-172. See also Jon Sobrino and Juan Hernández Pico, *Theology of Christian Solidarity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

⁴⁰⁸ Sobrino, "Humanity as Solidarity," in *Christ the Liberator*, 137.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*

transformation, “comes upon us not only in the manner of efficient cause – Christ interceding for us – but in that of exemplary cause: the way Jesus himself has trodden and left us.”⁴¹¹ It is the basic way for Churches and her members to relate to one another – the way of loving encounter (co-representation) and practice (co-responsibility).⁴¹²

b. The Praxis of Love in Spirit

Sobrino is convinced that the longing for the transformation of society – the sign of Christ’s total redemption – will be fulfilled by what “human beings achieve through activity carried out in love.”⁴¹³ In saying this, he echoes the insights from the final document of the Medellín conference, which cites *Gaudium et Spes*: that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, “entered the world history as a perfect man, . . . revealed that God is love, and at the same time taught us that the new command of love was the basic law of the world’s (societies’) transformation.”⁴¹⁴ Referring to Moltmann, Sobrino vividly appreciates the fact that “Christian existence is a practice of love.”⁴¹⁵ At the same time, he succeeds in offering mainly a generous theoretical and theological analysis of the idea. The only place where Sobrino comes close to specifying the concrete implications and content of such praxis of love is within the context of his discussion about God’s Kingdom as the Kingdom of basic life.⁴¹⁶ In the next chapter and concluding postscript of this dissertation, I shall make up for this seeming lacuna by providing some examples of paradigmatic figures and deeds consistent with the praxis of love that contribute to social transformation. The praxis that is not simply an extrinsic *imitatio Christi*, but as coming from the transforming relationship of love with Christ and with fellow human beings.

5. Critical Questions Addressed to Sobrino

For Sobrino, the appropriation of the life and mission of Christ is inextricably linked to social transformation, as we have extensively presented (in section 3), and further, creatively established (in section 4). The christological appropriation, as Sobrino maintains, is bound to be an effort that is “aimed at bringing about the total transformation of society as such.”⁴¹⁷ It is an effort which, on the one hand, draws from the very life and mission of Christ, marked by the three essential elements discussed here. This effort, on the other hand, as Sobrino wishes, should inspire Christians and theologians to take on, or to borrow a phrase from Sobrino, to “remake,” and live faithfully the life and mission of Christ in terms of the three elements – embodied relationship, empowered agency, and enacted praxis.⁴¹⁸ These three elements, from my creative synthesis and re-deployment of Sobrino’s

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 138.

⁴¹² Sobrino, “Bearing with One Another in Faith,” 150-152.

⁴¹³ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 19.

⁴¹⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 38. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 19.

⁴¹⁵ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 29.

⁴¹⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 84-86.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 160-161.

⁴¹⁸ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 340.

theological reflections, are the essential christological resources in his vision for social transformation.

However, there are some unattended issues in Sobrino's vision, to say the least. They may seem subtle, yet upon critical reflection these become noteworthy. In doing so, I am not simply striving to bring the shortcomings of his work to the fore for its own sake. Rather, it is important to keep them in view, so as to 'save' my own unique pursuit of a socially transformative Christology in and for the African context. This is a context in which: (1) Jesus Christ is not simply a concept, but a living reality; (2) the people of God are the principal 'originators', bearers, circulators, and translators of the vibrant christological beliefs in their longing for healing, social justice and human well-being; (3) there is an increasing attention on or demand for what the 'shape' of the liberating and transformative praxis might be for the believing individuals and communities of faith; and (4) there is an emphasis on the role of the Spirit, not simply as a "disposition," but as a *person* who enlivens and fulfils the transforming work of Christ. These four points provide the useful backdrop for my questions to Sobrino. I formulate them as questions that are uniquely inspired by "the African experience of Jesus," or as Cook still puts it, "Jesus' experience of the African."⁴¹⁹ As such, the critical questions and remarks are intended not simply to positively challenge, but to complement some aspects of Sobrino's appropriation of Christ for social transformation. With that I advance the course of cross-cultural and contextual Christologizing begun in the present research.⁴²⁰

5.1. Jesus Christ: One or Separate Reality, A Concept or a Person?

Early in the first volume of his christological corpus, Sobrino declares that one of his major tasks is to confront the traditional christological images, like Christ as love, Christ as power, and the "one-sided" image of Christ as suffering servant.⁴²¹ He argues that these traditional images of Christ have been used by "the powerful and oppressors" to advance the situation of poverty and oppression in Latin America.⁴²² Sobrino underscores the fact that the way or the "procedure" in which these traditional images have been used has also left the victims with no other image than that of "Christ as suffering servant."⁴²³ This image, he says, leaves the victims only with a mere sense of "consolation" even in the face of enduring, and mostly, unbearable desolation.⁴²⁴ The images make it difficult to expose the situation of "appalling oppression" in the context, not to talk of abolishing it. The believers holding on to the image of Christ as suffering servant, "had no reason to resemble Jesus or follow and carry out Jesus' mission in support of the oppressed."⁴²⁵

In his initial engagement with these images, particularly where he begins his critique of the "abstract Christ" of the traditional Christologies, he traces the problem to the fact

⁴¹⁹ Cook, "The African Experience of Jesus," 670-683, 683-691.

⁴²⁰ See "the scholarly relevance of the research" in the General Introduction, 13-16, at 14.

⁴²¹ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 14-17.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

that “Jesus is forgotten.”⁴²⁶ He is forgotten in many Christologies that “usually offered an image of Christ as a sublime abstraction.”⁴²⁷ In his modest effort to ‘remember’ Jesus, or to re-present him, Sobrino, then, distinguishes Christ in the sense as “adjective”, what he calls the “sublime title,” from Jesus of Nazareth as “noun”.⁴²⁸ This leaves the reader with the impression of an image of Christ in Sobrino’s Christology that is more linguistic or etymological, rather than personal or relational.⁴²⁹ It is also, as if a mere clarification, or what he considers as the “conceptual engagement,” of those distinctions would bring the oppressors and victims to the right christological understanding, and subsequently, “*a new way of living faith in Christ.*”⁴³⁰ We had referred to similar problem in our reading of the reconstructive Christology of Nigerian Victor Ezigbo, whose presentation of Christ leaves him (Christ) as an intangible referent for re-imagining the Christian response to the issues of social transformation.⁴³¹ One of the consequences of such etymological bifurcation is that the reality of Christ as a single united entity appears to be a separate reality.⁴³²

Secondly, in line with Ellacuría, Sobrino claims to apply the “philosophical” concept of historical reality to Jesus Christ. In doing so, both authors claimed to safeguard the unity of the historical and transcendental reality of Jesus. Their approach has its gains. For one, on the unity of the identity of Jesus Christ as true God and true Man. It also opens up the human and mystery character of faith in Christ; and positions Christian faith as something that has both a humanizing and divinizing value. To be a Christian is to be fully human, and to be fully human is to be profoundly divine. This insight is of great help to me in the present research and in the effort to engage the uncritical, and sometimes, ‘non-human’ and inhuman faith of many Christians in Africa.

That said, one still wonders at Sobrino’s claim to be “applying” the philosophical concept of historical reality to Jesus Christ. This move opens Sobrino to the accusation of presenting Jesus and Christ as separate realities. An example of such separationist tendency is seen in these words. Though they are attributed to Leonardo Boff, Sobrino himself affirms them, as well: “The Christology elaborated from the standpoint of Latin America stresses the historical Jesus over Christ of faith.”⁴³³ Sobrino agrees that the historical reality of Jesus Christ is a given; that is, that Jesus Christ was a historical personage. If this is so, the question then becomes: Does one need to *apply* historicity to Jesus as if he never had a historical identity or was never a historical figure, and even when he is confessed as “Christ”? To claim to do so, as Sobrino renders it, is to suggest that it is the prerogative of a believer, or, in this case, a theologian, whether to ascribe or not to ascribe a particular attribute to Jesus. This tendency is also found in a number of christological reflections by

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 15

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 15 and 39.

⁴²⁹ One has to keep in mind here that Sobrino has a certain suspicion of any personalist interpretation of the faith because such an approach, for him, leads to “an abandoning of the historical world to its wretchedness.” Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 16.

⁴³⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 13. Emphasis in the original.

⁴³¹ See my review and critical evaluation of Ezigbo’s christological approach and outcome in chapter 2.

⁴³² The lines of this separation of Jesus and Christ could be seen in Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 36-40, especially at 39.

⁴³³ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 35.

scholars.⁴³⁴ Aaron Riches, in his discussion of this tendency as found in Sobrino, sheds light on its moral consequence. I think Riches is right in his observation that:

“The problem with his [Sobrino’s] position is that it suggests that Jesus’ person and what he taught can be separated, and if this were so, the *vita apostolica* should be animated not so much by *sequela Christi*, but by an activist compliance with the “rules of the Kingdom” given by Christ. In this way Sobrino’s program (even though he doesn’t specifically spell out any of such in his two christological works) would seem to end up accommodating, in form of “moralism,” some version of the Pelagian error *solum homo* Christology, which *reconfigures* Jesus, no longer as the Savior, but as one who merely gives “an example of good works.”⁴³⁵

So we uphold, as Ratzinger puts it, “that the decisive statement of faith about Jesus consists in the indivisible or inseparable unity of the two words “Jesus Christ”, a unity that, theologians agree, conceals the experience of the identity of existence and mission.”⁴³⁶

5.2. Where are the People of God, Eventually?

Sobrino claims at the onset of his historical christological project to be concerned with developing a Christology that is informed by the faith experience of the El Salvadorans, the people at the grassroots, as he prefers to name them. This was obviously the case. However, a closer engagement with themes of his christological reflections, and the tone in which he fills them out, reveal a theologian more concerned with settling scores in the academic area. This is how Cook depicts this shortcoming. Sobrino’s Christology, Cook writes:

“...is directed to those already committed to the process of liberation (an elite minority) and so offers no analysis, criticism, or direction to the Christologies held by the popular masses. While this is a legitimate limitation, the reverse side is that his [Sobrino’s Christology] does not clearly reflect any positive contributions from the movement of the base communities.”⁴³⁷

What this means is that Sobrino does not succeed entirely in mining a Christology that pays a concentrated attention to the actual experience of the believing community. Also, his Christology does not sufficiently point to how the people of God could be brought to a deeper relationship with Christ and with other human beings, so as to become agents of the transformation of the society in which they live.

⁴³⁴ See my critique of this tendency, which I presented with the help of insights from Joseph Ratzinger and Rudolf Schnackenburg, in the first chapter of this dissertation. See subsection 1.1 in chapter 1.

⁴³⁵ Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ*, 220, footnote reference no. 38. For another critical assessment of Sobrino’s Christology along similar lines, see Edward T. Oakes, *Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 356-362.

⁴³⁶ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 204. I declared at the very beginning of this research that: “The creed followed in this study is faith “in the *one* Lord Jesus Christ,” which represents the basic statement of Christian belief in the unity and identity of Christ confessed by the apostle Paul (1 Cor 8:6).”

⁴³⁷ Cook, “Sobrino: Following the Historical Jesus,” in “Jesus from the Other Side of History,” 271-272.

At the beginning of his *Jesus the Liberator*, Sobrino rightly suggested that Christologies which do not confront the mysteries of evil, the *mysterium iniquitatis*, should be critiqued and scrutinized. In his effort to do so, he was overly concerned with the modern Christologies of his European intellectual counterparts.⁴³⁸ Thus, Sobrino was always beginning his christological reflections with attention to modern scholars. Never did he turn a concentrated attention (as I have done in my constructive yet critical engagement with the grassroots Christologies in African Christianity) to the Christologies of the people of El Salvador, which, wittingly or unwittingly, may themselves function to allow for the perpetration of injustice and oppression.

In raising the question – *where* are the people of God, eventually? – I am also asking about the ‘spaces’ or concrete locale for the cultivation of the christological “disposition” which Sobrino avers is needed for confronting and engaging reality in a comprehensive and transformative way. In the light of this remark, Sobrino’s historical Christology though profoundly an embodied corpus, does not sufficiently work out how believers in Christ can translate or adopt conscious voluntary practices on the basis of the insights from his Christology. There are very thin pointers to such specific practices in Sobrino’s Christology, which are not easily grasped. That is why this and other limits in Sobrino’s historical Christology will allow me to suggest some of those practices in the next chapter of this dissertation. It is also my way of making up for this and other lacuna in Sobrino’s historical christological vision for social transformation. Yet this question still remains an important point of possible contention.

5.3. What is the Shape of the Liberative (Transformative) Praxis?

At the heart of Sobrino’s historical Christology is the challenge to a renewed and strengthened sense of Christian responsibility (ethics). Even though Sobrino does not systematically outline a christological ethic like Bonhoeffer – something I will pursue briefly in the next chapter of this dissertation. Sobrino succeeds, on the proper ground of his historical Christology, in making only generous claims about what believers must do in engaging and confronting reality in general. From the start of and throughout his christological reflections, Sobrino placed an obvious emphasis on praxis. He talks about the praxis of Jesus and the expected praxis of those who believe in and follow him. However, he fails to describe the concrete shape or programmatic translation of the praxis that believers would have to take on for the transformation of societies in which they live. This is a limitation in Sobrino’s historical Christology that challenges us to think further about the shape of the embodied practices of solidarity within and beyond ecclesial communities, which can contribute to social transformation.

⁴³⁸ See, for example, Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 44-46, 110-121. See also Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 22-33.

5.4. Where then is the Spirit for the Praxis?

Sobrino talks continuously of Jesus' praxis with spirit as a fundamental idea for understanding the personality of Jesus Christ. As we have seen within his historical Christology, he bases this idea and develops it from within the proclamation of Jesus in Lk 4: 16-21.⁴³⁹ Sobrino always often makes the leap to the praxis with the spirit even when he claims quite correctly that his Christology is deeply pneumatological. Throughout his analysis of this aspect of Christ, he speaks entirely of Jesus liberating praxis with spirit to the point of almost obvious neglect of, and as synonymous to *the* Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.⁴⁴⁰ It was clear that Sobrino's interest was the defense and prioritization of Jesus' praxis and as a way of calling forth Christians and the community of the Church to take on this praxis in imitation of Christ. Therefore, Sobrino succeeds only in making an overly generous summon to Christians in this regard.

However, he does not point sufficiently to how such praxis with spirit is and can only be animated by the Spirit of the Lord. In other words, he does not see, neither does he demonstrate how the summon to take responsibility is the outworking of a transformation of the human agency of the Christian who shares in a relationship of life and love with Christ in the Holy Spirit. To be fair, Sobrino made a slight adjustment in this regard in a later essay, perhaps having realized this shortcoming.⁴⁴¹ In the essay, he acknowledges and discusses "the importance of living with Spirit."⁴⁴² Referring to Johannes B. Metz's "mysticism and politics of discipleship," and Ellacuría's call for "the contemplative in action of justice," Sobrino says matter-of-factly that, "Christian praxis, though absolutely necessary and urgent...of itself alone, will not be enough."⁴⁴³ The manner, tone, and style, in which Sobrino goes on to discuss "the spirit" is not in a deeply personal-relational manner in reference to the third person of the Trinity. He talks of "the spirit required in order to live the Christian life," "the spirit that produces the Christian life," in terms of "the spirit of honesty with which we confront the concrete history in which we live."⁴⁴⁴ In such perspectives, within the context of his historical Christology, which he claims is profoundly pneumatological, Sobrino speaks for the most part of the liberative-charged practical attitude and commitment to changing the social situation to the extent that he tends to tone down the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, who animates Christian life and praxis. Moreover, the resurrection event of Jesus Christ on which Sobrino bases the hope for a

⁴³⁹ Sobrino very briefly cites this biblical passage early in his *Jesus the Liberator*, 12.

⁴⁴⁰ Sobrino describes the distinction and his own usage of the Spirit and the spirit in his *Christ the Liberator*. He writes: "Although the distinction is not always clear, I am using "Spirit" and "Spirit of God" [capital S] to refer to the Holy Spirit, and the third person of the Trinity, and "spirit" [lower case] to refer to the Spirit's actual manifestations in history." Sobrino privileges the latter, and he gives the reason thusly: "Today, with the proliferation of movements relying on the Spirit (more as an expression of the marvellous and esoteric than as reality that inspires following of Jesus), in which...the Spirit sometimes seems to be invoked as a *deus ex machina* (the case in some African Churches) rather than as the Spirit of the God of Jesus Christ, it is incumbent on us to stick to the thesis: the Spirit gives us strength to follow, but the following is the proper setting for the Spirit. The way that leads to knowledge of Jesus Christ is "following with spirit" but not the action of the Spirit." *Christ the Liberator*, 328.

⁴⁴¹ Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," in *Systematic Theology*, 233-256.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 233-236.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 236.

transformed reality and Jesus' call to discipleship as commitment to the Reign of God, is an event by the power of the Holy Spirit (see Rom 8:11).

This shortcoming is easily perceived in many political and liberation theologies with their overly confidence in praxis and campaign for activism as *the* path to the transformation of social and political structures. Yet it is the Spirit itself that animated Jesus' praxis. It is the same Spirit that animates and shapes the praxis of remedying social ill and transforming social structures. The transforming enterprise will be empty without the Spirit that even enabled Jesus to act. I will return to this critical view in due course (in section 5 of chapter four) because it points to an essential aspect – the role of the Spirit – in the pursuit of a transformative Christology, and in the Christian understanding of and commitment to societal transformation.

Of course, these remarks about Sobrino's historical Christology do not undercut the depth of his insights for relating Christ to social realities, nor do they challenge the point of Sobrino's unique contribution in offering a christological vision for societal transformation. However, the remarks allow us to draw attention to the fact that Sobrino's historical Christology, even though he claims it is about the transformation of society as such, appears mainly to be a christological anticipation of or response to the possibility of societal transformation. In fact, towards the tail end of the second volume *Christ the Liberator*, Sobrino states that, "the purpose of what has been said in these two books is to provide conceptual encouragement for this response."⁴⁴⁵ To be sure, we will always need more than just "conceptual encouragement" in responding to the fundamental desire of people for healing, social justice, and human flourishing. However, I do not think of Sobrino's statement as a deficiency; it is, indeed, an encouragement and a source of inspiration for that matter. Because it is within the opening left by such christological anticipation, and by the inspiration from Sobrino's own effort that the present research locates another of its novelty. The threefold novelty consists in my ability to do the following: (1) to critically synthesize (some aspects of) Sobrino's historical Christology; (2) to creatively redeploy his christological insights in order to draw further from them, theological-social implications for connecting Christ and faith in him, to social transformation; and (3) to lay down more concretely, rather than just conceptually as Sobrino says and tends to do, how belief in Jesus can and does provide the resources for Christian commitment to social transformation. The third of the three novel endeavours is what I shall fulfil in the fourth and final chapter.

6. By Way of Conclusion

6.1. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I investigated the historical Christology of Jon Sobrino; that is, how Sobrino represents the identity and work of Jesus Christ, particularly in relation to the concern for the transformation of society. I began by offering a detailed explanation for my choice of Jon Sobrino and his historical Christology: (a) for engaging the African grassroots and

⁴⁴⁵ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 340.

academic Christologies, (b) in view of laying out more systematically the lines of the relation between faith in Jesus Christ and the transformation of society, and (c) in the connected task of pursuing a socially transformative Christology. After which, I sketched the contours of Sobrino's historical Christology and proceeded to discuss its foremost aspects of his historical Christology. The goal was to show how these aspects enable us more effectively to connect christological belief to Christian social engagement. For Sobrino's historical Christology establishes not only what we should say and know about the person and work of Christ, but also how we should *understand* him, and what we ought to *do* about being followers of Christ in the spirit of such understanding.

By presenting Sobrino's historical Christology in its somewhat broad terms first, and, then, focusing on the central aspect, the most historical reality of Christ's earthly life and mission and its three dimensions: (1. Jesus' relationship with the Father and other human beings; 2. Jesus' directedness to the Kingdom of God as the manifestation of his empowered agency, which is the outflow of the relationship; and 3. Jesus' call to discipleship as the acting-out of the relationship and agency), I lay the groundwork for considering, in the subsequent chapter, how belief in Jesus Christ relates to the transformation of society, on the one hand, and how the insights help in exploring the christological resources for social transformation, and in the pursuit of a transformative Christology, on the other hand.

From my critical engagement with Sobrino, I creatively brought the various perspectives of his historical Christology in connection to social transformation as such: the earthly reality of Jesus should be interpreted as the concrete representation, or preferably, imagination, of God's transforming presence and love in the world inhabited by people. As a result, the actual meaning of a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as healer, liberator, and king, and of the christological reflection on these images, come out more clearly, as Sobrino suggests, in relation to the liberating and transformative meaning of Jesus. This is to say that, the Christ-event and the event of transforming the world (society) are not isolated events. The concrete scheme and further christological ramifications of this idea are what I shall fill out in greater detail in the fourth and final chapter. Before doing that, let me offer, in what follows, a synthesis of how we have come thus far within the development of a single line of argumentation in this research.

6.2. The Discussion So Far, and A Look Ahead

It may be helpful at this point to draw together some of the main points and line of argumentation so far outlined in this dissertation, before going on to the final chapter. In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I offered a critical examination of how the figure of Christ is imagined and re-imagined in relation to the quest for social transformation, within the African Christian and theological milieu, respectively. I did that by means of three popular christological images – healer, liberator, and king. First, in the constructive-theological account of these images, that is, from my analysis of their meaning, operation, and functionality at the grassroots level, I argued that they bear a potential for the Christian vocation and responsibility towards the transformation of societies in Africa. I reasoned that the potential lies in (1) an enhanced *relationship* of the Christians with Christ and with

others, (2) in the engagement or empowerment of their human *agency* as the generative and creative outflow of that relationship, and (3) in the embodied *praxis* of solidarity with and for others as the basic form of Christian discipleship. At the same time, as I underlined in that first chapter, these socially transformative resources and the full potential of the christological beliefs are not yet satisfactorily explored. The potential has not been critically distilled given the way many Christians appropriate the images of Christ in their journey of faith and life.⁴⁴⁶

In the second chapter, I reviewed the insights of some African thinkers on the theological-practical meaning and significance of these christological images for social transformation in Africa. There, also, we saw that other scholars' theological reflections on these christological images do not sufficiently lay down nor work out how the images (1) imply an invitation to an *embodied relationship* to Christ and with others, (2) bear a resource for *engaging the agency* of the Christians, and very importantly, (3) make a *praxis-related demand* not simply on the Church hierarchy or ministers, but on the Christians themselves, who are called to be participants, or to become fully involved in the transformation of their societies.

We can speak about the problem – from our study of the grassroots and constructive Christologies in the first two chapters – to which we hoped to find a solution from our investigation in this third chapter in another way. To put it simply: A vast majority of the Christians believe and hope that Christ, who he is and what he does as their healer, liberator, and king, and their vibrant proclamation of faith in him *per se*, will bring about the transformation of their society. This christological perspective or attitude, I delineated, is overly utilitarian, quite reductionist and passive, and comes across as an instrumentalization of Christ's divinity. In a word, the imagination of Christ at the grassroots level tends to be a materialist and exclusionary view of him and the society: a view of Christ's identity and work that is simply about making things and society better for Christians. To be sure, this affects the way of the Christian engagement in the social sphere.

The theologians themselves reflect on the healing, liberating, and saving personality of Christ, and acknowledge that faith in Christ has radical implications for the transformation of (African) society. Yet they do this in a way that I referred to in the chapter as christological adaptationism, christological transposition, and christological ethical and doctrinal re-narration. That is, the reworking and translation of the cultural (Shorter and Manus), biblical (Éla and Oduyoye), kerygmatic-ethical (Mana) and notional (Ezigbo)

⁴⁴⁶ In the epilogue of his second volume, *Christ the Liberator*, Jon Sobrino describes the Christian faith and life as journey. The image of journey, for him, helps to delineate “the essential element of the Christian identity” and existence. He presents it in three senses. (1) The Christian life as the human correlation to a process that is found within God himself. That is, “the process of the unresolved tension between a God of life, of liberation, of resurrection, and a crucified God.” (2) The Christian life as a journey in the sense that it is the human response of faith to God and to “God's saving, dialectical, and journeying reality” in history. In this sense, Sobrino describes the Christians as those “who, like Jesus, walk with God and journey toward the mystery of God.” (3) The Christian faith as a “journeying in history” and a journeying for the *transformation* of history. Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 337-340. Emphasis mine, even though Sobrino draws attention to this transformative dimension in a significant way throughout the work, particularly in his analysis of Christ's identity in the light of “*the transformation brought about by*” him. *Ibid.*, 1. The present research takes the three senses of the Christian life as a journey into account, but privileges the third sense for the purpose of the objective pursued here.

perspectives about the identity and work of Christ, and how they find application, predominantly, in the pastoral activities of Church hierarchy in Africa. In a word, the christological judgements amongst the scholars seem very easy and clear-cut. The judgements come to something like this, to cite just an example with the liberationist trend of African Christology: since Christ is the liberator, then the Church and members, particularly its leaders should be too. However, the translation and applicability of such judgements are not so simple or direct. Things do not work as straightforwardly as such. And to put it in analogous fashion to Rowan Williams' characterization, "nothing in the world that claims to be Christlike can be so in any straightforward sense," given that Christ, the second person of the Triune God, is also infinite and beyond such simple application of his qualities and abilities to human beings.⁴⁴⁷

So, as it turns out, neither the Christians nor the theologians have been able to critically grasp and systematically explore the christological complexities and (im)possibility of such hope-filled confessions and intellectual judgements. This is obvious given the tone, the approach, and the outcome of their christological imagination and re-imagination, respectively, as I fleshed out in the first two chapters. I argued that neither of their perspectives will do, and neither of them does justice to how belief in Jesus Christ relates to the transformation of societies: never just the solution of material or societal problems by their way of proclaiming and invoking Christ's identity and work; and never just the simple recast or transposition of christological insights for and into the social realities of Africans, nor the ethical reduction into the programmes of the Church hierarchy.

This elicited, *inter alia*, the question: how could one respond adequately to these limits that come into view in the African (grassroots and constructive) christological landscape, in the quest to fully disclose the socially transformative potential of christological beliefs in Africa, and then, to realign them with the efforts to bring about social change in the continent? In view of addressing this question, I began by acknowledging – and as way to finding a solution – that there is a certain christological vacuum. What Orobator poignantly refers to as "christological bankruptcy" in the African (popular and academic) Christologies.⁴⁴⁸ Then, I suggested that there is the need, obviously, to fill up the christological lacuna. This is to be done, I argued, by integrating a christological scheme or using a christological model that will allow for more enhanced, engaged, and embodied appropriation of the images of Christ. Consequently, I began to consider that the search for and introduction of a (new) rich and robust christological model will be of some help in this regard.

As I proceeded with the arguments leading up to the conclusion in the second chapter, I pointed to the direction where we could search for, and possibly would find this christological model. The Latin American theologian, Jon Sobrino, I thought, and his historical or "saving-history" Christology that is grounded on Christ's existence as "incarnate divinity", will be of help in this regard. Sobrino's reflections on the aspects of Christ's earthly life and mission are particularly relevant for my goal in this project. His whole christological venture, as described by noted American Christologist and a leading

⁴⁴⁷ See Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 241.

⁴⁴⁸ Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa*, 100.

scholar of Sobrino's works, Robert Lassalle-Klein, "is an attempt to show *how* followers of Jesus Christ are drawn into a transformative participation in the divine mystery of the inner life of Christ."⁴⁴⁹ In the light and grace of this christological participation and transformation or, *relationship*, to use our preferred term, Christians (and, perhaps, those with whom they come into contact) become themselves *agents* of Christ's own transformative *act*.⁴⁵⁰

Jon Sobrino's Christology, which offers an analysis of Christ's personality, focuses on what he identifies as "the most historical aspect of Jesus." It allows him to present an understanding of the identity and work of Christ around various dimensions of Jesus' earthly life and mission. For the central purpose in the research, I discussed three aspects of Sobrino's historical Christology. They are: (1) Jesus' relationship with the Father and other people, (2) Jesus' directedness to the Kingdom of God, and (3) Jesus' call to discipleship and hope for a transformed reality on the basis of his resurrection. Sobrino's reflections on these three dimensions, with the christological model of Christ's existence as "incarnate divinity", brings a much-needed clarity to the three themes that are highlighted in the previous chapters (one and two), and will be fleshed out further in the chapter to follow (four). They are: (1) the Christian relationship with Christ and with others, (2) the agency of Christians, and (3) Christian discipleship as the practice of solidarity, that is, as being and acting *for* others. I argue that these three notions provide a better christological fashion for delineating the deeper significance of the relation between belief in Jesus Christ and the transformation of society. The notions shed light on how (African) Christians ought to understand their proclamation of faith and hope in Christ, and how theologians can think critically yet sympathetically about this proclamation. The goal, in the end, is to offer a more robust affirmation and radical disclosure of the socially transformative potential of christological beliefs in the African context. The affirmation and disclosure of this potential happens on two levels: normative and practical. That is the discussion that follows in the final chapter.

⁴⁴⁹ Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People," 355.

⁴⁵⁰ As John Paul II puts it in his very first encyclical letter, "the foremost activity of Jesus Christ the Redeemer of Man" [sic] would be that by means of which every individual Christian and the community of the People of God is assumed into (to participate and actualize) the fellowship of Christ's priestly (healing), prophetic (liberating), and kingly (representative responsible) life and activity of Christ himself. John Paul II, "Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, 4 March 1979," *AAS* 71, no. 4 (1979): no. 21.

CHAPTER FOUR

EMBODYING, ENGAGING, AND ENACTING CHRIST: CHRISTOLOGICAL TRAJECTORIES FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I entered into a creative, yet critical dialogue with Jon Sobrino's historical Christology. I did so in view of drawing out insights from his systematic-theological appropriation of Jesus Christ as the image of social transformation within his own Latin American context, a context that is somewhat similar to my own African context.¹ Accordingly, I presented a synthesis of Sobrino's interpretation of Jesus Christ – with the model of Christ's existence as incarnate divinity – in relation to the transformation of society. The synthesis was worked out along the lines of three christological themes: (1) Jesus' filial relationship with the Father and other human beings, (2) Jesus' exemplary service of the kingdom of God, and (3) Jesus' call to faithful discipleship. Using the method of correlation, I then connected each of these three dimensions found in the earthly life and mission of Jesus to a fundamental aspect of the Christian life and commitment towards social transformation.²

This sequence of connections can be presented thus: (1) the embodied relationship of Christians with Christ and with their fellow human beings correlates with Jesus' relationship with the Father and other people; (2) the engaged or empowered human agency of Christians towards enthroning the values of God's kingdom correlates with Jesus' commitment to the kingdom of God; (3) the enactment of practices of solidarity as the basic form of Christian discipleship correlates with Jesus' call to discipleship as the praxis of his resurrection and the act of hope for a transformed social reality. These christological imperatives are not mutually exclusive of each other. On the basis of the suggestion that each of the three fundamental dimensions of Christian life and existence – embodied relationship, empowered agency, and enacted praxis – correlates with a particular element in the structure of Christ's own earthly life and mission, I argue that they are the christological routes for actualizing the socially transformative potential of belief in Jesus Christ, in the African context.

In this fourth and final chapter, I continue with this line of reasoning – explicating further the normative and concrete implications of these christological ideas. By so doing, I wish to carry on the work of clarifying the relation (i.e., the theological-practical connection) between christological belief and the task of a positive transformation of

¹ See Sands and Verhoef, eds., *Transforming Encounters and Critical Reflection: African Thought, Critical Theory, and Liberation Theology in Dialogue*. As I already cited in chapter 3, some of the essays in the volume explore the similarity between Latin American and African socio-theological contexts.

² The Jesuit systematic theologian, Thomas Hughson, makes similar christological move on the basis of Christ's divine nature. See his *Connecting Jesus to Social Justice: Classical Christology and Public Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013). See also my review and critical appraisal of his attempt to do so in Anthony Atansi, Review of *Connecting Jesus to Social Justice: Classical Christology and Public Theology*, by Thomas Hughson, *Louvain Studies* 40, no. 1 (2017): 105-107.

society in Africa. In the same vein, I wish to demonstrate further in what follows, the socially transformative consequences of christological belief in and for the context. That is to say, the present chapter is a modest attempt to work out more fully in and for the African context, the implications of the three christological imperatives. The chapter suggests how the christological essentials might be understood and cultivated. It delineates the pragmatic means by which they are enabled and sustained over time as the resources for Christian imagination about, and commitment to, societal transformation.

To advance the argument in this chapter, I will proceed in five inter-related steps. First, I will discuss what the confession of faith in Jesus Christ – as a unique unchanging reality – means and entails, and how the confession can be amplified for the realization of societal transformation in Africa. The discussion takes into account whatever image by which Christ is proclaimed or presented by Christians and theologians in Africa. In this way, I will argue that belief in Jesus Christ implies, or rather, *is* an invitation to a personal, living relationship with Jesus and with other human beings. This embodied relationship itself is a fundamental dimension that needs to be worked into the confession and the experience of Jesus Christ as healer, liberator and king. Put simply, embodied relationship is needed for the re-imagining of Jesus as the bringer of social transformation. The relationship is also what energizes and orients the individual believer and the church on the journey of faith. It is what orients and sustains members of the believing community towards concrete practices of lived solidarity. By this fact, the relationship with Christ grounds, illuminates, and makes more fruitful, the Christians' commitment to the transformation of society.

Second, the engaged or empowered agency of Christians indicate that they are already graced and called to join in the effort of transforming society. I present the idea of empowered agency, understood not as some sort of psychological and somatic summoning or interactions, but as the necessary overflow of the relationship with Christ, and as the manifestation or exercise of Christ's ongoing agency in our society. I will explain that it is by the grace of such human agency, transformed and (re)constituted in Christ, that Christ *through* the Christians and others whom Christians encounter, transforms the social order.

Third, I will deal with the notion of enacted praxis as a leading form of Christian discipleship that can contribute to social transformation in Africa. I will do so by utilizing proposals from the Catholic Church's social teaching. It needs to be emphasized that the idea of praxis in the context of my discussion, is not merely in terms of civic activism or social advocacy, as good as they are in themselves. The praxis, rather, is the generous and graceful act of taking on the representative responsibilities or roles of Christ as healer, liberator and servant-king. Where the exercise of these responsibilities are the outcome of an embodied relationship and empowered agency of Christians; and as carried out, particularly, within the primary domains of everyday life. With these ideas, I hope to lay down in a more systematically and concretely graspable fashion, how belief in Jesus Christ relates to social transformation. That is, specifically, how christological images can become or present the resources for Christian engagement in the transformation of society.

But we have still not reached the end of our questions, for there is another level to the discussion. As it is, part of the objective of this research is to pursue a social transformation-oriented Christology. So, in the fourth section, I will consider how the

christological insights discussed so far lead us towards a whole ‘new’ way of looking at the meaning of Christology itself – Christology as the art of tracing how Christ transforms the social order by means of a living relationship, empowered agency, and embodied practices of solidarity “in his image and likeness”. Also discussed is how the insights help us to reinforce and broaden the social mission of the church in Africa. Furthermore, I will reflect on how the insights allow us to make space for the inclusion of a Christocentric vision and ethic – that flow from the way of being and acting that are characteristic of Christ – in the social sphere. In the fifth and final section of the chapter, I will briefly articulate a pneumatological dimension of a transformative Christology, highlighting how such a Christology equally requires that we remain open to the Spirit of Christ present and acting in our societies, in ways beyond our imagination: in ways that surpass the limitations of our experience and expressions of Christ’s identity and work as healer, liberator and king, and of our longing for the transformation he brings.

1. Embodying Christ: Relationship with Christ and Other Human Beings

The discussions in the preceding three chapters show that the question of the relationship between christological belief and social transformation touches very deeply on the related question of the real meaning and content of Christian faith. This is where the present dissertation comes in: one of its aim is to shed fresh light on the Christian faith, both as something that offers a vision for a transformed society and makes possible its realization in today’s Africa. Time and again in my encounter with people, both Christians and non-Christians alike, I am asked the question about what it means to me that I am a Christian, why I have remained one, and in what terms I can represent it to the people of my age and context. My response to such a question is this: that I am in a *relationship*, a loving and personal relationship with someone – Jesus Christ. I also respond to the questions why I have remained in such a relationship and why it is significant for me, in the following way: my relationship with Jesus Christ provides a vital ‘space’ and ambience within which my relationship with my fellow human beings takes place and plays out. It is the only way in which one can, perhaps more positively, attempt to offer an understanding of the confession of faith in Jesus Christ. My journey of faith is a growth in the disposition to allow my creaturely ability to relate with other human beings flow from my relationship with Christ as that Other, who by his life and spirit, forms and transforms a person.³

Suffice it for the moment to draw attention to Fuller psychologist, Warren Brown, who has developed these ideas about Christian faith as relationship, and its transformative character and potential at greater length, in a book co-authored with Brad Strawn.⁴ A

³ For a discussion of the nature of faith as a way of life and relationship, see N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (London: SPCK, 2006). See also Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008). See also Don Schweitzer, *Jesus Christ for Contemporary Life: His Person, Work, and Relationships* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

⁴ Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, eds., *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (New York, NY: Cambridge University, 2012), as cited and brilliantly engaged in the article by Christopher P. Vogt which I rely on for some of the insights here. See Vogt, “Virtue: Personal Formation and Social Transformation,” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016):181-196, at 189.

number of the essays in this volume explore the psycho-physical nature and practice of the Christian life and living. For example, chapters titled “How Relationships Shape Us,” “How We Are Changed and Transformed,” and “Why Bodies Need Church,” offer a “coherent and perspicuous account of the meaning, impact and practices of the Christian life...as a particular way of being human together in the world.”⁵ For my part, I do not want to stay on the level of anthropological or psycho-physiological explorations, as convincing as they may appear, about the transformative character and potential of Christian life understood in terms of relationship. I privilege rather the christological perspective about the Christian life and confession as *relationship*.

Joseph Ratzinger helps us to fill this out. He reflects on it in the following words:

“...it is only by entering into Jesus’ solitude and life, only by participating in what is most personal to him, his communication, his relationship with the Father, can one see what this most personal reality is; only thus can one penetrate to his identity. This is the only way to understand him and to grasp what “following him” means.”⁶

Ratzinger goes on: “The Christian confession is not a neutral proposition.”⁷ Confessing Christ yields its meaning from within the context of the experience of intimacy with him, which derives from and is directed towards “Jesus’ intimacy with his Father.”⁸ To my generation, the so-called millennials, and to many African Christians, the Christian faith is not often understood in such terms, even though many of them seem to highly appreciate it whenever it is presented in such terms – *loving relationship with the primordial Other*, who is Christ. So, it remains an essential task of Christology, and a transformative one at that, to tell the story, and to reflect on how the Christian faith is *a* relationship with that Other and with others with whom Christians inhabit the social sphere. And in doing so, one is enabled to tell a related story of how the transformation of society is grounded on, and is the outcome of this transformation of human identity, vision and mission made possible by immersion in the relationship with Christ. The meaning and existential structure of this relationship in relation to the quest for societal transformation in Africa are what I shall discuss further in the following subsections.

1.1. The Transformative Character and Potential of the Relationship

The relation between belief in Jesus Christ and the transformation of society, I have suggested, demands, first and foremost, a (re)learning of what faith in Jesus Christ means, what it entails to be a Christian, and one who is longing for the kind of transformation that Christ brings about. I argue that faith in Jesus Christ is not simply manifested in the loud confession or invocation of Jesus Christ as healer, liberator and king. Neither does it consist, as Sobrino finely puts it, in “showy and powerful charismatic actions” of

⁵ Vogt, “Virtue: Personal Formation and Social Transformation,” 189, 192-193.

⁶ See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1984), 19. Emphasis mine.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

believers.⁹ Nor does it just behove “Christians with their arms raised towards God in prayer.” An idea that Orobator critiques in his reading of Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical on integral human development, *Caritas in veritate*.¹⁰ It consists first and foremost in a personal intimate relationship that can then issue forth in the confession and invocation of Jesus Christ as healer, liberator and king.

The African Christian confession of Christ as “true God and true Man,” and which is borne in the exigent longing for societal transformation, I maintain, is reminiscent of 1 Jn 4:15, which states: “Everyone who confesses that Jesus is the Son of God participates in an intimate relationship with God and with other God’s children, God lives in him, and he lives in God.” This biblically-based christological awareness that prioritizes and highlights *relationship with Christ*, is not very present, nor has it been fully explored, in the African Christian and theological landscape today, with the work of South African Dominican theologian, Albert Nolan, as a very limited exception.¹¹ And even where one finds it – the aspect of Christian’s personal relationship with Christ – in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, it is often centred on self and the reconstitution of the subjectivity of the believer. Their insistence on relationship does not think through the implication of this relationship in terms of solidarity with others. We already underlined this serious limitation in our critical engagement with the Christians’ confession and the theologians’ interpretation of the life of Christ as the image of social transformation in chapters one and two.

As Rowan Williams vividly fills out within the context of the christological discourses of transformation:

“The only way of speaking truthfully about Jesus Christ...and the kind of change he was seen as bringing about, is from that mutually defining relationship in which human existence responds to the summons to self-abandonment, life for the other, which is the life that Christ embodies, in history as in preaching and sacrament.”¹²

As a result, any speaking of Christ, confessing him, or reflecting about him, as the bringer of social transformation, in whatever image or context this is done, demands speaking, proclaiming, and thinking about “the living relationship with Christ.”¹³ What this means is that to be a Christian, one who professes faith in Jesus Christ, or proclaims him in images that points to his person and work as true God and true Man, is to be living in a personal

⁹ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 13.

¹⁰ Orobator, “*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa’s Burden of (Under)Development,” 331. There Orobator refers to paragraph 79 of the encyclical in which the Pope emphasizes that, “*Development* (social transformation) *needs Christians with their arms raised towards God in prayer.*” Benedict XVI, “Encyclical Letter on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth, *Caritas in Veritate*, 29 June 2009,” *AAS* 101 (2009): no. 79. Emphasis in the original.

¹¹ Albert Nolan, “Personal Transformation Today,” in *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2006), 121-170; Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity: The Gospel of Liberation*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1992), see particularly the final chapter titled “Faith in Jesus,” 134-141.

¹² Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 195, 219-220.

¹³ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 219-220. See also Graham Ward, “Speaking of Jesus Today: Towards an Engaged Systematic Theology,” 94. The same line of thinking is followed in Michael Welker, “Reconceiving the Risen Jesus Christ,” in “Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?,” *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 2 (2002): 129-146, at 142-146.

and profound relationship with Christ – a relationship that draws one deeper into the mystery of Christ’s own life. A relationship by which we enter into the mystery of divine love, and are in turn opened and prompted to love our fellow human beings, to be and to act in their behalf. This transforming relationship of the individual Christian or community of believers with Christ is “one of loving trust and ‘alignment’ of will or desire.”¹⁴ The “effect is what the New Testament calls incorporation into the life and existence of Jesus – becoming a member of the ‘Body’ of Christ.”¹⁵ Many of the early Church Fathers refer to this mutual embrace of faith as *theosis*. *Theosis*, divinisation or deification, means that the human person *can* become by grace what the Son of God is by nature. This happens mainly as a transforming experience or transformative process. The experience or process, as the Fathers suggest, has a socially transformative value. For one thing, it raises and directs the social sensibilities of a person, who by his or her Christian confession, participates in an intimate relationship with Christ and other God’s children.¹⁶

Within the context of his reflections on the theology of health for the human person, Rowan Williams also observes that, “relating to Jesus is not something that excludes other relationships, but rather something that brings further life and hope to them.”¹⁷ The necessary consequence of relationship with Christ is the relationship of a Christian with other human beings. The human being exists only in relation to others. He or she *is*, lives and thrives, only in reciprocity of an I and Thou.¹⁸ That is to say, the nature of relationship with Jesus Christ is not by the fact of simply belonging to an institution, or being a member of the church. The relationship is also not to be taken for granted that it exists just because one has been baptised or welcomed into the community called church. To be sure, these are very defining moments in what becoming and being a Christian means, thanks to the rootedness in Christ by the grace of baptism. However, they can only be appreciated in their depth in terms of the christological notion of relationship that entails a conscious participation in the life of Jesus Christ and in the life of others. And by this participation, “our human identity shares the direction of the Word’s relation with the Father and other human beings.”¹⁹ This could and does happen in such a way that the Christian, as Williams asserts, “can be spoken of as derivative embodiment of the Word, of Christ within creation – or more accurately, as involved in a *communal embodiment* of the Word in the Body of Christ.”²⁰

If the personality and existence of Christ is such that he is unreservedly for the other, and is directed to the kingdom of justice and integral well-being for all, it then means that the relationship with Christ has the potential of creating in Christians the same dispositions which are necessary for a transforming relationship with others and in turn the

¹⁴ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For a recent treatment of the idea of *theosis* and its practical implications for the Christian life and commitment in the work of an early Church Father, see Ashish J. Naidu, *Transformed in Christ: Christology and the Christian Life in John Chrysostom*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 188 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 83-243.

¹⁷ Williams, “Health and Healing,” in *Holy Living: Christian Tradition for Today*, 18.

¹⁸ Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 43.

¹⁹ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

transformation of the social order. The relationship, put modestly, is a potentially fruitful ‘place’ of a transformative encounter at both the individual and societal level. These understandings of Christian existence and living, help in addressing the problem – in my diagnoses of the grassroots Christologies – of the instrumentalization of Christ: in Africa many Christians’ imagination of him as a self-serving and domesticated *deus ex machina* of societal transformation, on the one hand, and the individualization of the transformation that he brings, on the other hand. The understandings here also draw attention to a crucial aspect of belief in Jesus Christ, which is generally unexplored in contemporary African christological reflections about social transformation.

The mention of sacrament and preaching in the passage by Rowan Williams, earlier cited, anticipates a question which this section also seeks to address more directly. It is the question of where and how this transforming relationship with Christ and other human beings can happen, the sites or spaces for its enhancement, or even better: where and how it is concretely enabled, cultivated, and sustained as a resource for Christian commitment to societal transformation. This is the subject of our discussion in the following subsections.

1.2. Sites of Enhancement of the Transformative Relationship

1.2.1. Eucharistic Encounter

In African Christianity, the Eucharist is at the heart of Christian worship. “The faithful in the Christian communities of Africa,” Jean Marc Éla had rightly observed, “know and acknowledge that the Eucharist is the crown and summation of all the sacraments.”²¹ This is not just because the Eucharist is a sublime *locus* of the Christian community’s transforming relationship with God in Jesus Christ and with all those present (indeed, even those who are absent).²² The emphasis is also because the Eucharist has the potential of (re)creating a community that is charged to actualize the transforming life and mission of Jesus Christ.²³ This implicit, easily recognized potential of Eucharistic encounter and social mission is what my thesis aims to identify and explore in greater detail here.

There is an understanding of this sacrament, and an attitude towards it, by many Christians, which do not yet do justice to its socially transformative reality and potential. For instance, in some political and liberation theologies, the Eucharist, and the church as a Eucharistic community, are regarded as instruments and structures, respectively, of social-political change.²⁴ As such, the reflections in some of the works come across mainly as

²¹ Éla, “Eucharist in the African Churches: Sign of Salvation or of Dependence?,” in *African Cry*, 1-8, at 1. See also, Elochukwu Uzukwu, “Inculturation of Eucharistic Celebration in Africa Today,” *African Christian Studies* 1 (1985): 13-27.

²² See John Paul II, “Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003,” *AAS* 95 (2003): no. 31. English translation as officially published by the Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

²³ See Robert P. Imbelli, *Rekindling the Christic Imagination: Theological Meditations for the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 45-68. Listen also to Robert P. Imbelli, *Christic Imagination: How Christ Transforms Us*, Audible Audiobook – Original Recording (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media Inc., 2018).

²⁴ I am indebted to Stephan van Erp for the provision of a pointed diagnosis and critique of the problem with such views about the Eucharist as merely ‘tools’ and ‘instruments’ of the Church’s social and political

exploring the political and social consequences of the Eucharist, with the celebration of the Eucharist considered or presented as a revolutionary practice that points the way by which belief in Jesus Christ might again transform Africa.²⁵ Such understandings, whether advanced wittingly or unwittingly, undermines the spiritual and relational interpretation of the Eucharist, around which its transformative character and potential revolve, and from within which the potential is distilled. This limited and limiting notion of the Eucharist is not the case only in some African political and liberation theologies. It is also found in many places of worship in African Christianity where also Eucharistic celebrations, or what is popularly known as “Eucharistic adoration,” are seen and ‘used’ as instruments for moving Christ as king to heal, liberate and bring about changes in society.²⁶

So, against the sombre background of such instrumentalizing and materialistic views of the Eucharist, and of the ensuing attitudes, I would like to argue here that the Eucharist, as a site for both individual and societal transformation is, first and foremost, a celebration of Christ’s self-giving love. It is a celebration of what he did and who he is – the healing, liberating, and saving expression and presence of God. The celebration in turn is an invitation to participate in, or rather, draws those who participate in it into sharing in Christ’s transforming life. The Eucharist, in short, is *a* place of relationship with Christ and with humanity joined together in a mystical union. It is “the place” where the gifts of Christ and the Spirit are “actually transforming us, ... where the sanctifying power of those gifts is most strongly felt to enable and support a form of living in keeping with Christ’s.”²⁷ This is how Rowan Williams describes the place and role of Eucharistic encounter in enhancing the relationship of Christians with Christ and with other people, and consequently, the transformation of the social order inhabited by them:

“The Eucharist is the primary locus of the listening Church, the place where it shows itself to be there in response to the call of God; and the Scripture that embodies that call has to be read as leading to precisely the point, the existence of a community that *embodies Christ* and does so by reflecting his kenotic act (and translating his transformative presence).”²⁸

engagement. His insights were first presented in his inaugural lecture as professor of fundamental theology and political theology in Leuven. They are contained in his article “World and Sacrament: Foundations of the Political Theology of the Church,” *Louvain Studies* 39, no. 2 (2015-16): 102-120, at 102.

²⁵ For such understanding of the Eucharist, but presented in a somewhat nuanced manner, see Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011); idem, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017). See particularly the essay “A Different World Right Here”: Jean-Marc Éla and Re-imagining the Church in Africa,” in *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 102-124; and idem, “A Different World Right Here: The Church Within African Theological Imagination,” in *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 153-184.

²⁶ See the discussions in subsections 3.1.1 – 3.1.3 in chapter 1.

²⁷ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 199.

²⁸ Williams, “The Bible Today: Reading and Hearing,” in *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today*, 46. Emphasis mine. This idea is developed further in Williams’ “Christology, Ethics and Politics: Discourses of Transformation,” in *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 199-217, at 202-205. See also Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 134-135.

This understanding of the Eucharist and its socially transformative quality offers a more robust affirmation of the perspectives in many political and liberation theologies mentioned already. The insights address the somewhat narrow and exclusionary understanding of the Eucharist as the Church's political sign, or simply the tool of its social engagement.²⁹ In the light of perspectives such as that of Williams, I will flesh out how the Eucharist is more than just a political sign or symbol, and how it bears more than just a social consequence or value.

The Leuven fundamental theologian, Stephan van Erp, in a somewhat different context, casts a searching light on the transforming significance of the Eucharist. According to Van Erp, the Eucharist is the space where people are *enabled* “to become givers to the powers that give.”³⁰ He goes on, “in the Eucharist, a community of hospitality is given, in which all, especially the socially deprived, can trust that the common resources of a society will work for their good.”³¹ John Paul II, in his *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, reflects that the Eucharist is the celebration of God's transforming act in Christ, where the whole creation is brought under the symbol of bread and wine, transformed and given for the life of the world.³² That is to say,

“In the Eucharist the gifts of God in Christ are coming down to us for our sustenance, as energizing food for new lives...Through our repeated engagement in Eucharistic practice, we manage to feed continually upon that life-giving Spirit coming to us through the gift of Christ's own humanity in the elements, so as to grow into and sustain under trial a Christ-like life. In the Eucharist the humanity of Christ gives to us the life-giving powers it has by way of the Spirit that rests upon it, enhancing and nourishing our lives as those powers enhanced and nourished his own humanity.”³³

Considering these christological insights is not meant to suggest that in the Eucharistic celebrations we are only, more or less, participating bystanders, simply watching and waiting to receive from the gifts of the Father through the Spirit in the Son. We are, rather, substantially involved, like Christ himself is, in the transforming experience that takes place within the context of the Eucharistic celebration. Kathryn Tanner describes this involvement in terms of “ascent and descent.”³⁴ Where “ascent might be associated specifically with worship” that is directed to the Father, through and with the Son, in the Holy Spirit, “descent could be understood as service to the world that follows the ascent of service to God.”³⁵ Tanner discusses this movement further with a focus on what happens

²⁹ This perspective is quite dominant in Éla's re-imagining of Christ as liberator and the move to liberate Christian faith in the quest for the transformation of African churches and society. See Éla, “Eucharist in the African Churches: Sign of Salvation or of Dependence?,” in *African Cry*, 1-8. See also, Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 24-28, 47-50.

³⁰ Van Erp, “World and Sacrament,” 119.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 20. See also Elochukwu Uzukwu, “Food and Drink in Africa and the Christian Eucharist: An Inquiry into the Use of African Symbols in the Eucharistic Celebration,” *Bulletin of African Theology* 2, no. 4 (1980): 171-187, also published under the title as “Food and Drink in Africa: The Christian Eucharist,” *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)* 22, no. 6 (1980): 370-385.

³³ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 199-200. Bracket mine.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 204-205. Tanner notes, “the two movements – ascent, a movement toward God in worship, and descent, a movement toward the world in service to it – should properly coincide.” “Worship – explicitly

within Eucharistic worship. According to her, “the Eucharistic service repeats in a miniature the whole movement of ascent and descent, going to the Father and receiving from him, through Christ in the power of the Spirit.”³⁶ In union with Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, “we are lifted up *with* Christ...into the presence of the Father to receive gifts of new life from the Father.”³⁷ These gifts are received not simply for ourselves, but they are received as “the gifts of God *for* the people of God,” and “for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51), because the gifts, both of bread and wine, and of our lives “are made over into Christ’s Spirit-filled humanity.”³⁸

In this way, Tanner rightly expresses that, following this temporal sequence of consecrated elements and then sanctification of the faithful within its liturgical context, the Eucharistic service, can be, and actually is, a transforming experience.³⁹ As the gifts of Christ’s own transformed body and blood are brought back to us, and as we partake of them, we are “filled with every grace and blessing of the Spirit; and by blending that flesh with our own we become like Christ – Spirit-filled sons and daughters.”⁴⁰ We become embodiments of Christ’s own transforming life and mission, and so, are charged to transform other lives and the social sphere. In other words, at the end of the Eucharistic service, we become so transformed, empowered, and sent out like Christ into the society to continue his mission of transforming the social order.⁴¹ Thus, we are transformed so as to transform – transformed in the Eucharistic celebration and encounter in order that we may be able to transform or to engage more fruitfully in the transformation of the social landscape we are inhabiting.⁴² All this is possible because “we bring to the Eucharist gifts we have already received in order to get them back transformed from the Father as a conduit of further gifts.”⁴³

“It is as workers of the Father’s will in the world that we go out or descend from the Father empowered by the Spirit *in Christ’s own image*. The Spirit that is to sanctify us, make us holy as Christ is, is a commissioning Spirit, empowering us to participate in Christ’s own mission of loving service to the world...Receiving from the Father the

God-directed action – is an essential dimension of the task we are given for the world’s sake. And in serving the world we turn ourselves to God, in service to God who loves it. The whole of our lives, inclusive of both worship of God and service to others, becomes in this way an offering to God, a form of God-directed service.” Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 206. For another fine discussion of this two-fold movement of ascent and descent, see Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*, 8-9.

³⁶ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 200.

³⁷ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 200. Emphasis mine. See also Elochukwu Uzukwu, “Recapturing Mystery – Captured by the Mystery: Eucharistic Prayers in the Roman Rite,” in *Approaching the Threshold of Mystery: Liturgical Worlds and Theological Spaces*, ed. Joris Geldhof, Daniel Minch and Trevor Maine (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2015), 137-151.

³⁸ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 200. Emphasis mine.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 201. See also Uzukwu, “Ministry as Being Transformed into Eucharist,” in *A Listening Church*, 134-135.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Éla, “Christian Life and the Transformation of African Society,” in *My Faith as an African*, 24-26.

⁴² For similar understanding see Thomas M. Kelly, “When Liturgy Empowers: Rutilio Grande, S.J. and the Church of El Salvador,” – *The Liturgy Enters Society, Exploring Its Social Relevance and Existential Value* – in *Approaching the Threshold of Mystery*, 185-197.

⁴³ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 203.

gifts of Spirit-filled Sonship in unity with Christ, we are to do as he did when sent out from the Father (cf. Jn 20:21-22).”⁴⁴

There is something more that happens within the context of this transforming exchange. It speaks to how the concrete social realities of people, Christians and non-Christians, also become directly transformed. To flesh out the idea, Tanner refers to a fourth-century Church Father, Athanasius, who says that, in the Eucharistic service, Jesus “is offering our infirmities through himself to the Father, and they come back healed.”⁴⁵ He offers our wretchedness and vulnerability to the Eternal Source and they come back enriched and ennobled. Jesus “receives them from us – our hunger, weakness, and weariness – and offers them to the Father, interceding for us, that in him they may be annulled.”⁴⁶ In union with Christ, in being brought into closer relations with him, “all the trials and sorrows of life – suffering, loss, moral failing, the oppressive stunting of opportunities and vitality, grief, worry, tribulation and strife – are purified, remedied, and reworked through the gifts of God’s grace.”⁴⁷ Such that in turn we receive not just particular experiences of healing, liberation, and well-being, but *the* source of these gifts, Christ himself, and the gift of the Spirit that puts us on the path of healing, liberation and justice for ourselves and for our fellow human beings.⁴⁸ Along with this bestowal of gift(s), there follows a deepening of relations with Christ himself, by which in turn other lives and society are transformed.

This idea opens up to another aspect of the transformation that occurs within the Eucharistic encounter. It touches on the uniquely *formative* dimension and dynamism of the Eucharistic celebration. As the works of American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, have made clear, participation in the liturgy, particularly the Eucharistic celebration of the Church, is the most important way that Christians are formed in virtue, in the spiritual-social habits that enable them to become agents of societal transformation.⁴⁹ Hauerwas is also cited to maintain that “it is through their participation in the Eucharist that Christians learn to hear, understand, and enact the gospel story; it is through the liturgy that one learns the skills to know what the gospel is all about, what it calls you to do, and who it calls you to become.”⁵⁰ Nigerian ecclesiological and liturgical theologian, Elochukwu Uzukwu, has tried to develop a way of Eucharistic celebration in a “uniquely African style”. By doing so, he has also offered a vivid description of how the Eucharist can help in fostering the cultivation of such skills and “disposition” needed for enacting the good news of Jesus

⁴⁴ Ibid., 205. Emphasis original.

⁴⁵ Athanasius, “Four Discourses,” Discourse 4, section 6, p. 435, cited in Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 201.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 1-2.

⁴⁸ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 203. See also, Stinton, “Jesus Christ, Living Water in Africa Today,” 425-443.

⁴⁹ The idea as it is here is discussed by Stanley Hauerwas in an article, “The Gesture of a Truthful Story: The Church and ‘Religious Education,’” *Encounter* 43 (1982): 319-329, at 325, cited in Christopher P. Vogt, “Virtue: Personal Formation and Social Transformation,” 190. It is also discussed more elaborately in two of his earlier works, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and particularly in the last section titled “Sanctification and the Ethics of Character,” of his book *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1985), 179-228.

⁵⁰ In Vogt, “Virtue: Personal Formation and Social Transformation,” 190.

Christ – the news of his transforming presence and act in Africa.⁵¹ Through a critical discernment and integration of good elements in African traditional folklores, songs, dances, arts, and festivals, in the celebration of the Eucharist, Christian communities can attune to, and come to a more critical awareness, deeper appreciation, and embodied assimilation of the rich transforming and transformative symbolism of the Eucharist. The practice of contemplation, thus, can be of immense help in reclaiming this core of Eucharistic encounter. In what follows I treat it as a site on its own for enhancing Christians’ relationship with Christ and with other human beings.

1.2.2. Contemplative Practice

Contemplative practice is another site where the personal and communal transformation that could bring about social change happens. In other words, it is a site for cultivating and embodying loving relationship with Christ and other people. In our discussion of Sobrino’s Christology, Sobrino considers prayer as one of the frames of Jesus’ relationship with the Father and other human beings.⁵² In this sense, prayer, for Jesus, was a space of encounter with the love of the Father that generated loving compassion towards other people. Prayer, especially of a silent kind, was what awakened him to the will of God and to the reality of people (cf. Heb 5:7). It was also what animated his entire mission in service to God’s Kingdom.

This understanding of the significance and role of prayer in Jesus’ life can be filled out as a certain practice, which I suggest here as the practice of contemplation, or what is commonly designated in Christian spirituality as “the *askesis* of contemplative prayer.” The practice follows from the way of being (and of doing) found in Jesus Christ. As I already pointed out, it is the way of his relationship with the Father and other people, and the way of his service of the Kingdom of God. Rowan Williams describes it as the way of “contemplative dependence.”⁵³ Sobrino himself refers to it as Jesus’ trust: “trust in a God who is *Abba* and openness to a Father who is God.”⁵⁴ Thus, contemplation is the acknowledgement and exercise of the kind of dependency which Jesus has towards the Father: “the fully responsive and radically liberating and transforming dependence that is the filial relation in the divine life.”⁵⁵ It is, according to Williams, “the ground of all created (or human) dependence on the Creator God.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ See Elochukwu Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship: An African Orientation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997); See also Elochukwu Eugene Uzukwu, “Ritual-Symbolic Act as Creating and Re-Creating Community,” in *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness: Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 41-83.

⁵² See section 3.4.2. of chapter 3. See also Jon Sobrino, “Christian Prayer and New Testament Theology: A Basis for Social Justice,” in *Western Spirituality: Historical Roots and Ecumenical Routes*, ed. Matthew Fox (Notre Dame: Fides/Claretian, 1979), 76-114.

⁵³ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 221.

⁵⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 146-147. See also Sobrino, “The Christ of the Ignatian Exercises,” in *Christology at the Crossroads*, 396-424; idem, “The Prayer of Jesus and the God of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels,” 189-213.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 222

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

These initial insights help us to rethink the dominant understanding of prayer and mode of praying in the name of Christ, in many African Christian churches. In these churches, there are countless liturgical and other forms of religious practices which emit uncorrelated decibels of sound and deafening noise. Needless to say, these noise levels are undesirable and disturbing to the well-being of the human person, to the environment, and does not even bespeak of trusting personal *relationship* with God in Christ. To this effect, there is the need to rediscover more of the solitude, silent, forms of contemplative prayer, which persons like the late renowned Nigerian ecclesiastic, Archbishop Albert Obiefuna, promoted within the context of his pastoral solicitude and social imagination. I shall say more about that in the concluding postscript of this dissertation.

In a recent book *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology*, there is an interesting essay titled “The ‘How’ of Transformation in Levinas and Coakley.”⁵⁷ The author of this essay, Annette Pierdziwol, refers to an idea that is very present in Coakley’s works: that contemplative practice is *how* (where) personal and societal transformation happens.⁵⁸ Contemplation is a practice that is truly enhancing, empowering and, consequently, transforming, for it gives rise to prophetic imagination and act.⁵⁹ Sarah Coakley herself – speaking in a somewhat different context – writes about the practice of contemplation in these words:

“The ascetic practices of contemplation are themselves indispensable means of true attentiveness to the despised or marginalized other.... There is much talk of the problem of attending to the otherness of the other in contemporary post-Kantian ethics and post-colonial theory; but there is very little about the intentional and embodied practices that might enable such attention. The moral and epistemic stripping that is endemic to the act of contemplation is a vital key here: its practiced self-emptying inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more discomfiting, more destabilizing to settled presumptions, than a simple intentional *design* on empathy.”⁶⁰

Rowan Williams says much the same thing, within a much more direct context of the discourses about Christian commitment to societal transformation. According to Williams, the practice is the key to the Christian existence and living.⁶¹ He makes the bold claim (Williams himself admits as much) that deserves a much-needed attention in contemporary African Christianity and christological exploration. Williams avers:

⁵⁷ Annette Pierdziwol, “The ‘How’ of Transformation in Levinas and Coakley,” in *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology*, ed. Janice McRandal (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 15-48.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 17. See also Sarah Coakley, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 78-93; Sarah Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and Systematic Task,” *Criterion* 7, no. 1 (2009): 2-12.

⁵⁹ Pierdziwol, “The ‘How’ of Transformation in Levinas and Coakley,” 28-35, 41-46.

⁶⁰ Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and Systematic Task,” 6-7. Emphasis in the original. It is also cited in Matthew T. Eggemeier, “A Mysticism of Open Eyes: Compassion for a Suffering World and the *Askesis* of Contemplative Prayer,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12 (2012): 43-62, at 54; idem, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision: Christian Spirituality in a Suffering World* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 124-169.

⁶¹ Williams, “Contemplation and Mission,” in *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today*, 93-103.

“Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from these...Contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane society that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly in our world. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.”⁶²

In a similar chain of reasoning, the religious historian and theologian Philip Sheldrake helps us to fill out in what specific manner the practice of contemplation could lead to societal transformation. According to Sheldrake, the practice of contemplation, as “the interior process of liberation from self-seeking,” allows those who go through the process to become agents of Christ’s ongoing transforming presence and act in the world.⁶³ Sheldrake maintains that “if we are to draw an overall conclusion about the relationship between spirituality (belief) and the work of social transformation, it would be approached adequately in terms of the purification of human motivation in relation to social justice.”⁶⁴ He rightly argues that, “any truly effective commitment to promoting social justice,” and working for social transformation, “cannot be purely political but demands the purification of human motivation through a challenging practice of contemplation.”⁶⁵

Within the contemplative site, one is brought to a “place” of de-centering and centering at the same time. The de-centering challenges our ego and normal urge to seek things only for ourselves, as when majority of African Christians tend to see Christ as one who simply works for their well-being. This centering experience is the kind by which our human agency is recreated and re-oriented in such a manner that we no longer think only of ourselves, but of others (cf. Gal 2:20; Rom 14:7). We are acted upon and empowered to live entirely for others like Christ did and does (2 Cor 5:14-15). This ought to be so, Sheldrake rightly thinks, because “human beings are not able to find true compassion or solidarity, nor create or transform structures of social life, without entering contemplatively into God’s own life of love and communion with humanity.”⁶⁶ “Only social action that is nurtured by contemplative practice is capable of bringing about the change of heart necessary for lasting solidarity and social transformation.”⁶⁷ For “without re-inspiration,” which is granted and harnessed in and through contemplative exercise, “nothing new or transformative begins.”⁶⁸ And this happens as “a leaving off of oneself leading to a living

⁶² Ibid., 96-97. In a forthcoming essay that draws heavily from the present research, I discussed the practice of a social transformation-oriented Christology as a contemplative practice. Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, “Contemplating Christ and/in His People: The Practice of a Social Transformation-Oriented Christology – in Africa,” in *What Does Theology Do, Actually?: Observing Theology and the Transcultural*, ed. Matthew Ryan Robinson and Inja Inderst (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 283-305.

⁶³ Sheldrake, “Christian Spirituality and Social Transformation,” 18. See also Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 221-223.

⁶⁴ Sheldrake, “Christian Spirituality and Social Transformation,” 18.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 17-18.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 18.

God.”⁶⁹ The occurrence of a union of minds, hearts and wills, or “the *via unitiva*,” to use Sheldrake’s phrase, sets in motion healing, liberation and the reign of social justice, and thus, give birth to true social transformation.⁷⁰ This happens as the *event* in which people become capable of transforming others and their social order because they too are transformed by the spirit and the life they have been imbued with in the contemplative encounter.

Therefore, enhancing the relationship with Christ and with other people through contemplative practice is not a luxury for the few; it is an experience that is available to everyone. It is a social and cultural necessity in Africa and elsewhere. To be sure, it is the grounding and vitality for social action, the kind that will bring about the transformation of society. To say that the practice is not a luxury for the few is to suggest that it demands an attentiveness and openness to others who also long for and are deeply involved in the work of social transformation. This brings me to consider a third site for enhancing the relationship with Christ and other human beings, which in turn can bear on the promotion of people’s well-being within African society.

1.2.3. *Learning and Sharing Christological Wisdom*

The third space where the transforming relationship with Christ and other human beings is enhanced is in the grace of learning and sharing what I call christological wisdom. This third site is based on the fact of a particular dimension of the christological model of incarnate divinity. The dimension highlights the conviction that the incarnation of Christ as a universal event is not limited to the concrete reality of the church but is present in other – sometimes unexpected – places of truth, goodness and beauty. One challenge in realigning christological beliefs in African Christianity with the efforts to bring about a more just social order is to help Christians grow out of their individualistic and, often, exclusionary, understanding of Jesus and the kind of change he brings about. This entails the challenge to open up to, and to live in relationship with, other truth and justice-seeking individuals and communities, who also are genuinely longing and labouring for the transformation of African society. That is where the importance of learning and sharing christological wisdom comes in as a site for fostering transforming relationship with Christ and other people, which in turn, will contribute to the common effort of working for the transformation of societies.⁷¹ Christians cannot be drawn like Christ in the concern for a more just social order, if they do not learn to share with others who may not belong to their own institutions, even when the latter are themselves committed to the work of societal transformation. As Lisa Sowle Cahill rightly argues: “Christians can be seeds of change in larger or different communities as they expand transformative practices and engage the imaginations of other people with images and narratives of changed relationships.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ For a similar train of reasoning, see Volf, “Sharing Wisdom,” in *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*, 99-117.

⁷² Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics*, 289.

In considering this site as such, I seek first to recognise Christ's much larger all-embracing transforming presence, which is beyond the conventional spaces for enhancing relationship with him. This train of reasoning also serves to respond to what has been described as an important contemporary question of whether and how the "Christians' transformed identity and action begin to transform other communities."⁷³ And "what social changes might result from the dynamic relationships and interactions of Christian communities with multiple other communities?"⁷⁴ Secondly, it is my intention to inveigh against any kind of exclusionary thinking or behaviour among many Christians and, surprisingly, their leaders, which do not make room for other considerably "christological" sources of knowing, understanding, growth and transformation, at both personal and societal levels. It is out of place when adherents of a particular Christian tradition tend to be exclusionary, individualistic, and even competitive, in their putative relationship with Christ, on the one hand, and in the quest for societal transformation, on the other hand.

In saying this, I am brought to face up to a christological dialectic. The dialectic consists in the fact that the acknowledgement of other christological sources outside of the traditional places, is made feasible by the experience of a Christian's own unique encounter with Christ, for instance, by the way of his or her contemplative practice, and from within the context of his or her participation in Eucharistic celebration. In other words, the experience of Christ in the Eucharist and the contemplation of Him together have the potency of opening the one who participates in them to other human persons. Participating in the Eucharist ought to move Christians to reach out to others to share and to receive the wisdom of Christ, particularly needed in the common quest for human and societal flourishing. Such "outward-directedness", to use a favourite phrase from Jon Sobrino, bears a socially transformative potential. This idea, surely, needs to be filled out more.

To do so brings us to address the following questions. What do I mean by christological wisdom, and in what does its learning and sharing consist? How can such learning and sharing be fostered within and beyond the believing communities? And how can it promote Christian social engagement? By christological wisdom, I mean the interpretation of socio-historical reality in the light of Christ, *who* is "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). This interpretation of reality from the Christic imagination or vision also entails the exploration of ways of engaging, confronting and transforming reality.⁷⁵ With regard to the second question, Orobator's response seems to me a helpful one. According to Orobator, the learning and sharing can be fostered in and through what he describes as "christological catechesis."⁷⁶ He explains further:

"The findings of African Christologists need to be systematically presented to African Christians at the grassroots level, using a language that is accessible to them. The result will be a familiarity with the person of Jesus Christ using points of reference that not only appeal to but are also constitutive of the African religious experience. In this christological catechesis, the story of Jesus Christ should be retold as an African story of Christ our ancestor, guest, liberator, healer, brother...according to the African

⁷³ Ibid., 179.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Listen also to Imbelli, *Christic Imagination: How Christ Transforms Us*.

⁷⁶ Orobator, "The Quest for an African Christ," 96.

experience of these realities. It is at this grassroots level, also, that the effective difference Christ makes in the life of the suffering and oppressed Africans can be explored and pointed out as an experience open to all Africans.”⁷⁷

The idea of christological catechesis which Orobator presents in the quote above challenges the conventional style of catechesis that is dominant in African Christianity.⁷⁸ Often a set of perfect answers are given to questions majority of Christians might be asking about Christ, the meaning and significance of his life in their social situation. Christians are simply told what to believe about Christ, whether or not they could *relate* to the object of belief that is Christ himself. They are not taught *how* to believe, how to *experience* and appropriate Christ as the image of social transformation, how he brings about the transformation of lives and society. The aspect of catechesis touched on by Orobator was spelled out by John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation “On Catechesis in Our Time, *Catechesi Tradendae*.” According to John Paul II, “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy [relationship] with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”⁷⁹ As “the one message – the Good news of Christ’s salvation” is shared in such a manner, the Pope writes, there is an increase in “an awareness calling for ever greater commitment” that affects the life of society as such.⁸⁰ In addition, he describes this aim of catechesis as having a profoundly social dimension. In its endeavour to educate the faith, the concern of catechesis is also “to clarify properly, realities such as man’s activity for his integral liberation, the search for a society with greater solidarity and fraternity, the fight for justice and the building of peace.”⁸¹

Furthermore, the art of learning and sharing Christic interpretation and understanding of social reality consists in, or better, fosters the cultivation of a disposition of openness towards others who also in their unique ways share their own experience and expressions of Christ’s identity and work. This idea is very important, because it is not just the Christian communities that make the experience and expressions about Christ a living and transforming reality. The New Testament offers a description of Christ’s much larger,

⁷⁷ Ibid. Michael Cook’s work supports Orobator’s proposal regarding the importance of narrative, or telling stories of faith, to use Orobator’s preferred description, for personal and communal formation and transformation. See Cook, “The Return to Narrative in Liberation Theology,” in *Christology as Narrative Quest*, 178-185. In another place, Cook refers to the work of Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz that draws upon African proverbs and other oral literature for promoting what they also describe as “a life-centred, experience-based, and transformation-oriented catechesis.” See Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), cited in Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 686.

⁷⁸ One of the catechetical works which was read to my siblings and I by my mother, and is still used in many Roman Catholic Churches today for the catechetical formation of children and young adults was published by Catholic Mission, *Ndu Dinwenu Anyi Jesu Kristi* (Onitsha-Owerri Vicariate: Hull, 1940). See also Robert Vosloo, “Remembering the Heidelberg Catechism in South Africa Today? Some Remarks on the Commemoration of a 16th Century Reformed Confession,” *Acta Theologica* 34 (2014): 1-15. Vosloo draws mainly on the work by Karl Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981).

⁷⁹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation “On Catechesis in Our Time, *Catechesi Tradendae*,” 16 October, 1979, *AAS* 71 (1979): 1277-1340, no. 5.

⁸⁰ *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 16 and 26.

⁸¹ Ibid., no. 29.

universe-spanning meaning and role.⁸² And as the council fathers reckon in *Lumen Gentium*, all people, Christians and non-Christians, are members or potential members of the body of Christ. Hence the talk about or proclamation of Jesus' life and work has a certain unique momentum undergirding it. There is a propensity, according to Graham Ward, for "Jesus-talk, once culturally embedded and culturally (socially) pervasive," to spill over into the streets and unexpected places.⁸³ It is always "taken up elsewhere...mouthed, mimicked, modified, cited and recited in contexts beyond institutional boundaries."⁸⁴ In short, it often "goes viral," as Ward puts it.⁸⁵ So that Christians, their leaders and theologians, need to open up to, "appreciate and hear ways Jesus-talk is circulating, and has, in fact, a life of its own, outside the ecclesia."⁸⁶ As Ward further expresses:

"...if we as a church are to learn how to speak the Christian faith today, to speak of Christ today, and learn how to compose our systematic examinations of the faith today, in our times, in our places, in our sociocultural conditions, then we have to learn about how Christ is spoken elsewhere."⁸⁷

Two examples of such places, for instance, within the music industry in Nigeria, where Christ is spoken of in very moving ways, come to mind: the musical tracks, *Jesu, Onye Ndu* and *Nwannem* (Jesus, leader and my brother/sister) of popular artists, Osita Osadebe and Onyeka Onwenu, respectively. The two musical tracks provoke even more profound reflections on the model of Christ's existence as unreservedly 'for others,' and involvement in other lives, as the inherent dynamic for a spiritual and ethical interpretation of Christian identity and living.⁸⁸

How then do these reflections about christological wisdom, and the art of learning and sharing it, relate to the work of social transformation? Obviously, the art of learning and sharing christological wisdom, as a space within which is enhanced Christians' relationship with Christ and other people, has the potential of connecting Christians with a broader human community, towards working together for the transformation of the societies in which they all inhabit. The learning and sharing take the form of, and at the

⁸² I am indebted for this understanding to Franciscan theologian, Richard Rohr. In his book *The Universal Christ*, Rohr quite convincingly shows how this idea "was described clearly in and always in the first chapters of John's Gospel, Colossians, Ephesians, Hebrews, and 1 John, and in the writings of the early Eastern Fathers." See Richard Rohr, "Transformation and Contemplation," in *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2019), 204. Similar idea is underlined in *Dominus Iesus* when it acknowledges that the presence and action of Christ go beyond the Church's visible boundaries since the kingdom of God that Christ came to bring about its reign "is the concern of everyone: individuals, society and the world." Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, *Dominus Iesus*," August 6 2000, *AAS* 92 (2000): 742-765, no. 19.

⁸³ Ward, "Speaking of Jesus Today," 95.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, "*Jesu, Onye Ndu na Nwannem*: Images of Christ in Classical Igbo Musical Album," *Ministerium: Journal of Contextual Theology* (forthcoming 2020). The same line of thinking is followed in the article by Ivana Noble and Tim Noble, "Christ Images in Contemporary Czech Film," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1 (2007): 84-106.

same time, promote what Pope Francis aptly describes as “social dialogue.”⁸⁹ It happens in such a manner that also enlarges the ability of Christians to strive together with people of diverse backgrounds, and to engage with them in cooperative activity in the pursuit of a common goal, which is here the transformation of African society.

Stephan van Erp articulates the theological underpinning to this idea in terms of what he rightly refers to as “dependency.” Dependency, according to Van Erp, “is at the core of the Catholic view of Christian life, and as such also at the heart of Catholic social teaching.” He further describes this dependency as follows:

“It is a universal view that seeks to include all people of good will who suffer and struggle, who fail and fall, who conquer and succeed when they strive for the common good. As members of a body, the community that is the church, they need each other. People are each other’s hand and foot, eye and ear, heart and head...so that God’s glory will reveal itself in all the effort and suffering people experience on the way they walk together, with each other’s help, and thanks to each other’s engagement.”⁹⁰

I shall return back to this idea shortly in the second section where I discuss “interfaith relation” as the formal structure for activating and enhancing initiatives that focus on (trans)forming agents of societal change, and that mobilize the agency of people to become fully involved in the processes of social transformation.

The three sites – Eucharistic encounter, contemplative practice, and learning and sharing christological wisdom – for initiating and maintaining relationship with Christ and other people, are not to be understood as abodes of our own human creations. The fact of their existence does not make transformation to happen automatically. No. The transforming experience and disposition from within these sites are brought about by the workings of the Holy Spirit in hearts that are open. They are locations within which we are pointed away from our own capacities and powers to Christ, what he has already done and is still doing for us humans and for our transformation. For Christians are not able to change the structures or social institutions of transformation without entering into deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ, who in Africa is highly proclaimed and upheld as the bringer of social transformation. In other words, the grace of our relationship with Christ and others through the power of the Holy Spirit is the presupposition and enduring foundation, the source and ground, of the exercise of our agency and of all our actions in the manner of Christ’s own life. This meaning of the Christian confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the image of societal transformation moves the present discussion to the next step. They lead into the theological-practical exploration of agency and praxis. Thus, agency and actions, from the christological understanding of faith as the embodiment of Jesus’ relationship with the Father and with other humans, are the second and third set of topics of our discussion in the next two sections.

⁸⁹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 238-241, 255-258.

⁹⁰ Stephan van Erp, “Christ, the Stranger: The Theological Relevance of Migration,” in *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, ed. Ulrich Schmiedel and Smith Graeme (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), 265-279, at 276.

2. Engaging Christ: Mobilizing the Human Agency of Christian(s)

The christological idea I wish to flesh out in this section is this: the unique relationship between Christians and Christ on the one hand, and among Christians on the other hand, gives rise to the engagement of Christians' own finite agency and, in turn, the agency of their fellow human beings. In other words, human agency is engaged, or become empowered, by the grace of the transformative power of Christ working in every Christian, and in the lives of those with whom Christians come into contact. The agency is further empowered by growing in the awareness that each person one encounters is a bearer of Christ's transformative power; and in the concerted commitment to acknowledge this *presence* and power in one another. This, I argue, is also a resource for working effectively towards the transformation of African society. This argument needs some spelling out in greater detail, first, by explaining the meaning of engagement or empowerment of the human agency of African Christians; and, second, by describing further its shape and structure.

By the engagement or empowerment of Christians, I mean the mobilization of the whole human person in the same christological pattern in which Christ's own humanity was animated by his relationship with the Father in the Spirit. It is the cultivation of the divine in the human, the awakening of human capabilities that would not otherwise have been imagined. In other words, engaging the agency of Christians is the enhancement, or rather, the transformation of their "creaturely ability" and freedom.⁹¹ This transformation consists in enabling the Christian to be fully who he or she *is*, and to *act* in the mode of Christ's own life and deed. This is what Sobrino means – even though he doesn't fully articulate it as such – when he speaks of "taking the victims down from the cross so that they can live as risen beings."⁹² However, this praxis of taking the victims down from the cross, or better, this engagement or empowerment of the agency of every Christian, victims and non-victims alike, ought to be experienced as the overflow of the living relationship with Christ in the Holy Spirit. This is to say, empowering the agency of African Christians is not to be understood as an after-effect of a psychological-somatic summoning or activation, as suggested in some practical theological reflections on empowerment.⁹³

For his part, Lawrence Nwankwo offers a more deeply, sustained theological interpretation of the idea of empowerment of human agency.⁹⁴ The underlying

⁹¹ The coinage and the idea of the phrase is inspired by my reading of Rowan Williams' *Christ the Heart of Creation*, in which he also discusses how human beings and Christian communities are enabled to enact the life of Christ towards the transformation of their social habitat.

⁹² Sobrino, "The Praxis of *Raising* the Crucified," in *Christ the Liberator*, 45-49.

⁹³ Examples of works in which the engagement or empowerment of the agency of African Christian is presented slightly in such terms are: Tinyiko Maluleke, "The Rediscovery of the Agency of the Africans: An Emerging Paradigm of Post-cold War and Post-apartheid Black and African Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000): 19-37; Victor Ezigbo, "Rhetoric of God's Empowerment in Nigerian Christianity: Its Import for Christian Identity and Social Responsibility," 199-220, at 214; Léocadie Wabo Lushombo, "Christological Foundations for Political Participation: Women in the Global South Building Agency as Risen Beings," *Political Theology* 18, no. 5 (2017): 399-422.

⁹⁴ See "From Power Christianity to Christianity that Empowers: Towards a Theology of Empowerment in the Nigerian Context," 293-324; idem, "'You have received the Spirit of Power...' (2 Tim. 1:7): Reviewing the Prosperity Message in the Light of a Theology of Empowerment," 56-77.

christological motif for the empowerment of the human agency of Christians is in terms of what he aptly refers to as the “divine-human synergism.”⁹⁵ It is the communication between Christ, the One who is fully divine and human, and the Christian, who shares in this divine and the human fullness by the fact of his or her baptism and participation in the life and Body of Christ. Nwankwo fills it out beautifully in this way:

“The incarnation is the high and unique point of this divine-human synergism. Through the Holy Spirit, God is still active in history, ‘trans-substantiating’ individuals and communities into the Body of Christ and the Bread of Life to be broken and shared for the life of the world.”⁹⁶

In her own essay, M. Shawn Copeland also discusses similar idea about the mobilization of the human agency of believers – as a resource for transforming their social realities – still on the basis of the incarnation.⁹⁷ Through the work of the Institute of Black Catholic Studies, she shares the example of an ecclesial community, in which the agency of its members and their ministers have become so empowered “to respond holistically to pastoral needs in the black community and make a gift of their ministry to the church universal,” and the larger human community.⁹⁸ Copeland describes the mobilization of agency in terms of the revitalisation of the values of the human mind and spirit, the agentic entities of every human person. This revitalisation happens, according to Copeland, as the outcome of the reconciliation of the divine and the human “in accord with the Spirit.”⁹⁹

It is by the empowerment of the African Christians, understood in such incarnational-christological terms, that they are enabled to confront their social situations, and are able to engage more effectively in transforming them for the well-being of all.

2.1. As the Generative Overflow of the Relationship with Christ

Early in his article already cited, South African theologian, Tinyiko Maluleke, proposes that “theology retains a unique role in acknowledging, valorising, interpreting and *enhancing agency of African Christians* in their daily struggles against the cultural, religious and socio-economic forces,” which have continued to jeopardize the well-being and flourishing of people and of the continent.¹⁰⁰ Maluleke also considers that focusing on “the central rediscovery of the agency of Africans,” helps for a more constructive exploration of the relationship between “Africa and Christianity on the one hand, and between Africans and their painful Christian past on the other.”¹⁰¹ In this light, he thinks that focusing on the enhancement of the agency of African Christians is central in both the theological reflections about Christian faith, and in the promotion of Christian life, towards

⁹⁵ Nwankwo, “‘You have received the Spirit of Power...’ (2 Tim. 1:7),” 57.

⁹⁶ Nwankwo, “‘You have received the Spirit of Power,’” 57.

⁹⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, “The Institute of Black Catholic Studies: Culture, the *Sensus Fidelium*, and Practical Theological Agency,” in *Learning from All the Faithful: A Contemporary Theology of the Sensus Fidei*, ed. Bradford Hinze and Peter Phan, 237-254

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁰⁰ Maluleke, “The Rediscovery of the Agency of the Africans,” 19-22. Italics mine.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

social transformation in Africa. To him, this task of enhancing the agency of African Christians requires some “serious methodological changes,” in African theology.¹⁰² In addition to these changes, Maluleke contends that the task also requires “an outlining of an emerging paradigm.” In his effort to fulfil these tasks, he sketches the contours, and re-articulates the contents of the usual theological renderings about the rediscovery of the agency of Africans.¹⁰³ These include the three trends (inculturation, liberation, and reconstruction) and some of their proponents, which I have discussed and engaged with in the second chapter of this dissertation.

It is fair enough that Maluleke is against any “simplistic, positive-thinking philosophy” on the issue of enhancing the agency of Africans towards becoming more committed to the transformation of their society.¹⁰⁴ However, I find his approach and proposal to be very limited in nature and scope. The project and prospect of enhancing the agency of African Christians so that they can become more committed to the work of societal change is undeniably a grand one. And Maluleke considers that this project will simply be realised in the provision of “theoretical and methodological tools for African theology.”¹⁰⁵ Where, then, is the place, and what is the role, of the Christians whose agency is to be enhanced? How can the theoretical and methodological insights find concrete application in the lives and situations of Christians, whom Maluleke has in view while offering his theological reflections and proposals? How is it possible that theoretical and methodological reconstructions by “a lonely theologian” (Maluleke’s own honest admission), will enhance the agency of a *community of believers*? These are, for me, critical questions in the talk of engaging the agency of African Christians. They also point to the limits of Maluleke’s proposal, and which one finds in many scholarly circles, as we already saw from our discussion in the second chapter of this dissertation.

In providing a theological response to the issues of poverty, social injustice and deprivation, and in the proposals for the transformation of the social conditions of people in Africa, particularly through the empowerment of the *agency of Christians*, we are confronted with the reality of Christ. As such, the main theological challenge is not so much the construction or reconstruction of theoretical-methodological framework for rediscovery of agency, as Maluleke suggests. Rather, it is about the proposal of a reality, Christ, and an experience of him, a relationship with him, which bear the entire possibility of enhancing the agency of Christians, and in turn, transforming them to become agents of the change brought about by Christ. What I mean here is that if African Christians seek more to enter into living relationship with Christ, there would be personal transformation that will give rise to social change. This brings me back to the “christological concentration” of this engagement, enhancement or empowerment of the human agency of Christians, and its exercise for the transformation of lives and society in Africa. The point is that, human agency is engaged, enhanced, or empowered by the Christians’ relationship with Christ. So that the form this empowered agency takes is the form of Christ’s own agency, which is

¹⁰² Ibid., 22.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 28-33.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

ultimately manifested in self-emptying. This idea of empowered agency as the manifestation of Christ’s ongoing agency is the subject of the next subsection.

2.2. The Manifestation of Christ’s “Ongoing Agency”

I would like to continue the conversation about the christological form of the enhanced agency of African Christians. Doing so is important for dealing properly with the “simplistic, positive-thinking philosophy [and I add psychology], such as is often promoted by conservative behaviourist,”¹⁰⁶ in theological reflections about engaging the agency of Africans, and by motivational preachers in many grassroots Christian communities. The exercise of an enhanced human agency, as the generative overflow of the relationship with Christ, is a testimony, or better still, a prolongation of Christ’s own agency. This is possible, since “in Christ the very form of humanity is re-created, and all human relations are reoriented toward the reality of Christ.”¹⁰⁷ What this means is that human beings have been reconstituted and are able to live forth their agency in the likeness of Christ’s own agency.

Furthermore, in and through his own relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, Christ became empowered to exercise his own agency, which he lived and still lives entirely “for the other.”¹⁰⁸ In this sense, Christ’s own agency is understood as an “agency that has no element in it of ontological insecurity.”¹⁰⁹ As Sobrino reflects, Jesus is convinced that God is good to him and to all beings. And his experience of God’s goodness is what set him free, and accounts for his total availability to God and goodness to other people.¹¹⁰ This offers a profound inspiration for the Christian understanding and cultivation of the kind of agency that can be transforming in relation to other lives and society. Rowan Williams has expressed this idea splendidly. Christ’s agency is

“[a] human agency that is characterized consistently by availability, *disponibilité*, for the other, a human agency that is identified as representative of the human other without reservation or restriction, is an entirely intelligible translation into human narrative and finite action of the undefended act of God who cannot lose or lessen what is proper to divine life.”¹¹¹

Such a living and loving is made possible, I maintain, even though this bears repeating, within the context of one’s relationship with Christ. The relationship is marked prominently by the abandonment of one’s life to the transforming love of Christ, just like Christ did of his own life to the Father (cf. Lk 23:46). The consequence of such abandonment is certainly the paradigmatic attitude of self-giving, or “self-donation,” to use a phrase by Volf.¹¹² It is

¹⁰⁶ Maluleke, “The Rediscovery of the Agency of the Africans,” 27.

¹⁰⁷ Robert P. Imbelli, “Christian Belief Requires Transformation, not Facile Compromise,” *America: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture* vol. 220, no. 7 (April 1, 2019): 1-5. This essay by Imbelli is an excellent review of Rowan Williams’s *Christ the Heart of Creation*.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 11. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 145-146.

¹¹¹ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 11.

¹¹² Volf, “‘The Trinity is Our Social Program’: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement,” 412-417.

what makes the transformation of society possible by the life and action of those who have become so transformed as to live “radically” and “exhaustively” the ongoing agency of Christ. This is so and is possible because “Jesus never stopped working through the instrument of his humanity after his death and resurrection.”¹¹³ Erik Borgman reckons that, “on the contrary, from the eternity that He [Christ] now, after his resurrection and glorification, shares with his Father, He is still acting through his human acts and passions, especially...in the meaning these actions and passions communicate when they are contemplated.”¹¹⁴ That is, in the way the passions and actions motivate “people to lead lives following Jesus’ example.”¹¹⁵

2.3. In Every Event of Encounter with Others

Christ, through the event of his ongoing life and mission, is the embodiment and ground of other transformative relations among human beings. This is to say that the Christ-event is not limited to those who explicitly proclaim Christ in certain images. By the fact of Christ’s incarnation, God seeks to extend himself and to express his solidarity with the whole human race. In this way, every life-giving event of *encounter* with every human being becomes an expression of the same solidarity. Hence “encounter” is another key element in grasping and translating what it means to be one who has become incorporated into Christ. As Éla rightly puts it: Incarnational “faith is a way of living one’s life and of being responsible for the future of one’s sisters and brothers, conscious that history is not yet finished, that it must still be invented by everyone...making of each day a moment in creation.”¹¹⁶ Hence, to proclaim Christ, and to yield to him, is to recognize always that, “the other person whom I encounter is already the one with whom Christ is in solidarity, and the death I must endure is the death of anything that stops me acknowledging that and acting accordingly.”¹¹⁷

Likewise, the encounter entails “freely, consciously, and dynamically accepting our vulnerability, interdependence, and contingency which comes from being mortal material form in an unpredictable world.”¹¹⁸ Transformation theologian, Oliver Davies, describes this encounter as “the embrace of being...which occurs when we freely receive the other, in complexity as the form of *the real* – Sobrino’s favourite phrase – for us in that situation.”¹¹⁹ This brings about a *personal* change in us.¹²⁰ And it “comes about in immediate proximity to another and in the acknowledgement of our own interdependence.”¹²¹ Davies goes on to say very rightly, “such a change, then, in the face of the other, is likely also to have an effect upon them, and so is likely also to be socially transformative.”¹²² This idea summarizes the point I wish to make in this subsection.

¹¹³ Borgman, “Still Revealing Himself: How Jesus’ Resurrection Enables Us to Be Public Theologians,” 108.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹¹⁶ Éla, *African Cry*, 98.

¹¹⁷ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 209.

¹¹⁸ Davies, “Social Transformation,” in *Theology of Transformation*, 170. See also Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 209.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 171. Emphasis mine.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.

Such an encounter is made possible in the first place by the engagement of the human agency of the Christian; and the encounter in turn enhances the ongoing engagement of the human agency of the Christian. This is possible not simply because Christians are merely social beings, but because of their *participation* in the life of Christ, one in whom all human beings are united. In other words, I am not suggesting, as Davies does at times, any sort of “scientific self-understanding as social creatures,” who “are ‘hard wired’ to expose ourselves openly to the other.”¹²³ Davies describes this as the “neurobiology of ‘face-to-face’, the capacity to build community.”¹²⁴ The experiences of so many forms of exclusion in our world today call to question the claim to this capacity. That is why we can think of the encounter with other human beings in christological terms, to think of the encounter as a uniquely and profoundly christological experience. And, all the more to do so, if the encounter is aimed at becoming a space for both personal and social transformation. This understanding leads me, then, to recall interfaith relations, in a religiously pluralistic society like Africa, as a viable locus, a gift and task for actualizing the socially transformative possibility of an enhanced agency – the subject of the next subsection.

2.4. Christian and Non-Christian Relations as the Formal Structure

In chapter one, I laid out a problem in the African Christians’ imagination of Christ for societal transformation at the grassroots level: the *individualistic* vision of Christ and the change he will bring about as a result of the vibrant proclamation of him as healer, liberator and king. This limitation is often manifested in the form of exclusionary and competitive attitudes amongst Christians themselves, and towards people of other religious traditions, in African society. My argument here is that the dynamics of Christians’ relationship to the humanity of Christ, which is the source of their empowered agency, provides the ground of the multiplicity of relationship Christians find themselves in. And these Christian and non-Christian relations have consequence for the transformation of lives and society.

This is to say, the social situation demands a shared form of relations that allows believers and non-believers to see that the human flourishing of each and every member of the society is guaranteed. More specifically, the realities of human suffering and social injustice in Africa call for both a Christian and non-Christian response that can connect the identity and mission of Christ to interfaith relations and cooperation for change.¹²⁵ Moreover, we cannot keep apart from each other as Christians, or even as adherents of various religious confessions, and think that we can transform society in the image of Christ, who we confess is “the first-born of *all* creation” (Col 1: 15). To uphold this view is to suggest that every human person, regardless of one’s religious affiliation, bears the life of the Logos. Hence, the belief in the Incarnation as a universal event calls into question any form of individualism and exclusionary (Christian) social engagement. Thomas Hughson puts it this way:

¹²³ Ibid., 172-173.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics*, 1. See also, Thomas Hughson, “Public Theology: Interior, Ecumenical, Interreligious,” in *Connecting Jesus to Social Justice*, 203-227.

“Orientation to a just social order comes from the creating Logos and belongs really, but not uniquely, to Christianity. [This is] because the Incarnation permanently unites the Logos with the humanity of Jesus...and all of humanity. [Therefore] Christian fidelity to the identity of Jesus the Logos incarnate, to whom all people relate, though not all intentionally, as the divine source of the light within them, places Christians in potential solidarity with all who seek the common good and act in social justice.”¹²⁶

In his Social Encyclical Letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* – On the Social Concern of the Church (1987), John Paul II remarks that, we are all one family in the world, having a common origin in the Triune God.¹²⁷ As human beings we are all called to build a community that empowers the agency of everyone “to attain their full potential through each of us respecting each other’s dignity, rights, and responsibilities.”¹²⁸ An acknowledgement of this fact, the Pope maintains, contributes to the transformation of society. In referring to community building as members of one human family, John Paul has also in mind the ecclesial community that is characterised by interfaith relations as the space for such empowerment. The point is made more clearly in his *Ecclesia in Africa*. There, it is underlined that the challenge of transforming society in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, is “fundamentally the challenge of transforming relationships between individuals, nations and peoples in religious...life.”¹²⁹ The Pope considers that “fostering close relations with Muslims and by promoting respect for the values of African traditional religions,” is the formal space for mobilizing the agency of Africans towards dismantling the obstacles to the “real transformation of the conditions of underdevelopment on the continent.”¹³⁰

This is to say, in sum, the church’s mission for the transformation of African society, by an inner and urgent necessity, needs to foster relation that is open to people of different religious background.¹³¹ Such a relation recognises and privileges the common humanity of the African people in the shared longing for human flourishing. This is important both for the fruitfulness of the mission itself, and for the enhancement of Christians’ agency in terms of their self-understanding, consciousness and freedom, in a religiously pluralistic society like Africa.

3. Enacting Christ: Christian Discipleship as Praxis of Solidarity

The topic of this section is the concrete shape and structure that Christian life and living, being and acting, should take towards the transformation of the social order, given our christological relatedness within the social sphere, and the outward directedness of the actions of individual believers and ecclesial community. This idea of relatedness and

¹²⁶ Hughson, “Interreligious Cooperation,” in *Connecting Jesus to Social Justice*, 223-227, at 226.

¹²⁷ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter “On the Social Concern of the Church, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*,” 30 December 1987,” *AAS* 80 (1988): no. 49. English translation as officially published by Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

¹²⁸ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 33.

¹²⁹ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “On the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000, *Ecclesia in Africa*,” 14 September 1995, *AAS* 88 (1996): no. 79.

¹³⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 137, and idem, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 22.

¹³¹ See Jonhson A. Mbillah, “Interfaith Relations in Africa,” in Diane B. Stinton, *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations*, 109-117.

outward directedness of Christians derives from the dimension of incarnational faith and spirituality, which are rooted in Christ's existence as "one with us" and "being for others". Furthermore, the dimension is based also on the acknowledgement that the flesh-taking of the eternal Word cannot be limited to the reality of the church and the experience of Christians. In my view, this idea challenges any kind of isolated, self-concerned existence. That is to say, in sum, the aforementioned idea is also defined by the christological scheme of Christian living as an embodiment and enactment of ongoing incarnation of Christ. Consequently, Christian living is shaped by and manifested in "following Christ" (which is a key phrase for Sobrino, among others), a practice of Christ's being and acting "unreservedly 'for others'."¹³²

Hence, one can argue that the enhanced relationship between Christians and Christ, which, in turn, leads to an engaged agency of Christians and others whom they encounter, is manifested through and in the embodied practices of solidarity, particularly within the domains of "routine human relations," or what has been called the mandates of human social existence. In other words, the practice of solidarity within these domains, as I discussed in the third chapter, is in itself a christological act. It is in the exercise of what we may call primary solidarities that the transformation of the social order is realised. I will first explain what this shape of Christian living means. Afterwards, I will draw out its implication in the light of the fundamental orientation of the Christian commitment to follow Christ as healer, liberator and king. Then, I shall allude to three structures of the routine life which African Christians ought to also recognise as "structures of Christ's own life."¹³³

This section is also important in response to a certain understanding that, academic Christology has nothing to say about the structure and form of Christian love. Some theologians that we have already mentioned in this dissertation, people like the Nigerian theologian, Anthony Akinwale, think that the primary role of theology (obviously he will say the same of Christology) is what he describes as the "dogmatic responsibility for the Christian God."¹³⁴ My contention is that such dogmatic responsibility entails, by an inner necessity, a reflection about the form of loving this God. In other words, reflecting on discipleship and its structures is central in our efforts to point to the meaningfulness of God, of Christ, and of Christian faith. As Oliver Davies rightly puts it: "It may be here [in speaking about the structure and shape of loving act] too that we find the communicative power of Christianity [Christology] as a form of social transformation at its most dynamic."¹³⁵ Davies goes on:

"Loving acts are infectious: they challenge our experience and imagination. They unbalance the shallow conventions of society with their radical spontaneity...It is in the free response of enacted love in Christ's name, which is always situationally located, that we find our faith is most *real*, and that we are closest to Christ himself as living reality in our lives. [It] must also be here that we experience him most as a truth that extends beyond my own subjective apprehension of him...It is in enacted love,

¹³² Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 166.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹³⁴ See Akinwale, "African Theology and Dogmatic Responsibility for Christian God."

¹³⁵ Davies, "Theology and Enacted Love," in *Theology of Transformation*, 20.

when I am most ‘in’ Christ as he is ‘in’ me, through the Holy Spirit, that I know him most according to his universality. I encounter him in my everyday world.”¹³⁶

In what follows, I shall look more closely at what these insights mean in the life and social context of African Christians, who in their longing for the transformation Christ brings, proclaim him as healer, liberator and king.

3.1. Being and Acting *for* the Other

The enhancement of the Christian’s relationship with Christ and with other people leads to a way of *being* that is directed towards *working* for the good of others. It entails going beyond myself to otherness. Like Christ, who, from his relation to the Father, lives forth his own agency in the exercise of charity in respect both of other humans and other creatures in general, the human agent (Christian) incorporated in Christ has the responsibility also of serving and fostering the good of other humans and of other creatures too.¹³⁷ Kathryn Tanner, drawing on insights from John Zizioulas’s *Being and Communion*, expresses the point as follows:

“As Christians, we must identify ourselves, immerse ourselves in the world of change, struggle and conflict as Christ did for us, for the sake of the world’s own betterment. Just as the incarnation was in history and its effects only evident there, so Christian service is in and of the world and nowhere else. Though we are elevated beyond the world, as Christ was, through the gifts of God, we should use those gifts as Christ did for the world, not holding them simply for ourselves but being the means of their distribution to others.”¹³⁸

In tracing the influence of Bonhoeffer on Sobrino in subsection 2.3.1., I referred to the principle of “*for*” as a central christological datum in Sobrino’s understanding of Christ’s existence, and consequently, of what being a Christian means. I will like to fill out this idea further here in my effort to explicate how “being and acting-*for*-the other,” is the decisive form of Christian discipleship. This Christian form of being and acting-*for*-the other is also the basic christological norm for working out the concrete terms in which the life of Christ could be embodied, engaged and enacted.

A passage in Joseph Ratzinger’s *Introduction to Christianity* sheds further light on this subject of Christian existence as consisting in *being and acting for the other*. Ratzinger writes:

“Being a Christian means essentially changing over from being for oneself to being for one another. This also explains what is really meant by the concept of election (“being chosen”). It means, not a preference that leaves the individual undisturbed in himself and divides him from the others, but embarking on a common task. It is the abandonment of self-centredness, an accession to Jesus Christ’s existence...in harmony with the basic idea that man, leaving behind the seclusion and tranquillity of

¹³⁶ Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

¹³⁷ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 227.

¹³⁸ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, 63.

his “I”, departs from himself in order to follow the crucified Christ and to exist for others.”¹³⁹

Ratzinger goes on, “all the great images of the history of salvation, which represent at the same time the great basic forms of Christian worship, and the basic structure of Christian life, are expressions of this principle of “for”.¹⁴⁰ This is not so much only a call to self-abnegation or simply to give of one’s self for others. For Ratzinger, it is also a call to recognize that even the one who gives of himself or herself “lives on the unexpected, unprovokable gift of others’ “for”, and so should be ready to receive.¹⁴¹ “To be fruitful, all self-sacrifices demand acceptance by others, and by the other who is truly “other” of all mankind and at the same time completely one with it: the God-man Jesus Christ.”¹⁴² This, for him, is the basic mode of human existence and of the true meaning of living, being, and acting for one another.¹⁴³ This mode of Christian being and acting can be described simply as love.¹⁴⁴ Love is being open to the other, to “lose ourselves” for the other’s good. It entails surrendering to Christ, and in the light of his grace and strength, become open to other human persons. This dialectical relationship of love is the power with which Christ and Christians transforms the world and society.

A further observation can be made about the understanding of Christian existence as being and acting for others. It is bound up with the theme of solidarity. This being and acting for others in loving relationship presupposes solidarity because it assumes that we are all connected to and in need of each other.¹⁴⁵ Of course, Christ is at the centre of it all. Solidarity gives a robust affirmation to love as the mode of Christian being and acting. In other words, the insights about Christian existence as “being and acting for the other” draws motivation from the principle and practice of solidarity. The insights receive concrete expression as solidarity. As John Paul II so beautifully put it, “solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far,” in Africa and elsewhere.¹⁴⁶ On the contrary, “it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are really responsible for all.”¹⁴⁷ Pope Francis, at the start of his

¹³⁹ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 252-253.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ See Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter “On Christian Love, *Deus Caritas Est*,” 25 December, 2005, AAS 98 (2006): no. 12-18. See also *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 5. See also Lisa Sowle Cahill’s treatment of the subject of love as the leitmotif of Benedict XVI’s Word Christology in relation to societal transformation, “*Caritas in Veritate*: Benedict’s Global Reorientation,” 296-298.

¹⁴⁵ Jon Sobrino, “Bearing with One Another in Faith: A Theological Analysis of Christian Solidarity,” in the *Principle of Mercy*, 144-172. In another place, Sobrino describes solidarity in very concrete terms as people, the rich and poor alike, “mutually bearing one another, giving ‘to each other’ and receiving ‘from each other’ the best they have, in order to arrive at being ‘with one another’.” Sobrino, “*Extra Pauperes Nulla Salus: A Short Utopian-Prophetic Essay*” in *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*, 63.

¹⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.

¹⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 39. See also Valerian Okeke, Pastoral Letter, “You and the Common Good,” (Onitsha: Feros 2 Limited, 2007); Paulinus Ezeokafor, Lenten Pastoral Letter, ““This is the Sort of Fast That Pleases Me...” (Isaiah 58:6) – Commitment to the Common Good,” (Okpuno: Fides Communications, 2014).

Petrine ministry, diagnosed the world’s ills in this way: “the many situations of inequality, poverty, injustice...weakening and often total breakdown in social bonds, are signs not only of a profound lack of fraternity, but also of the absence of a culture of solidarity.”¹⁴⁸ Our inability to still recognise our belongingness to each other, and to live always in this consciousness of being for the other.

Some concrete translations of how and where to promote this culture of solidarity as the christological path to societal transformation in Africa are what I shall offer in the following subsections.¹⁴⁹ Hence, the discussions deal, first, on how Christians, *following Jesus Christ*, can take on his representative roles as healer, liberator and king; and subsequently, on the exercise of these representative roles within the structures of everyday life or “the domains of routine life,” to borrow a phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

3.2. Following Christ: Taking on Christ’s Representative Roles

Jon Sobrino writes that discipleship, as a state of being, is bound up with the idea of the Christian as someone who *follows*.¹⁵⁰ It also presupposes “following” because the Christian is graced to share the life of Christ and walk the way of Christ. Sharing the life of Christ and walking his way entails doing the work of Christ, that is, taking on the representative roles of Christ whether as healer, liberator, and king. This is to say, the Christian makes Christ present again in time and space. This assumption of Christ’s role is more than just the imitation of Christ in the sense of simply going to do like Christ. We know from Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man that, such an injunction – “go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37) – is not always an easy one to abide by. This does not mean that Jesus’ injunction is not to be taken seriously.

The challenge, however, remains, and which I have been dealing with in this chapter is, how Christians are to understand the inner and concrete meaning of this injunction. How they are enabled to really “go and do likewise,” to get involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives, in a word, to become like Christ, healers, liberators and servant-kings in the spaces they inhabit with others. This ought to be so because Jesus is not simply a being to be worshipped or proclaimed; he ought to be followed, and in fact, the one demand he made was, and which he still makes is, that we should follow him. We should share in his life and do what he did for the life of the world. In the words of N. T. Wright:

“The point of following Jesus isn’t simply so that we can be sure of going to a better place than this after we die. Our future beyond death is enormously important, but the nature of the Christian hope is such that it plays back into the present life. We are called

¹⁴⁸ Pope Francis, “Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace, 1 January 2014,” www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xxvii-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html [accessed 15 July, 2019].

¹⁴⁹ For a general exhortation to put solidarity into practice, see also John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 138-139. According to the Pope, Christians in Africa will be able to practice solidarity by becoming “ever more aware of the *interdependence* among individuals.” By virtue of this awareness, the solidarity “seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the *specifically Christian* dimension of total gratuity.” Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁰ Jon Sobrino, “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 686-687. See also, Sobrino, “Praxic Christology: The Following of Jesus as an Existential Expression of Faith in Christ,” in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, 131-135.

here and now, to be instruments of God’s new creation, the world-put-to-right which has already been launched in Jesus and of which Jesus’ followers are supposed to be not simply beneficiaries but also agents.”¹⁵¹

Discipleship as being agents, as already seen above, entails “taking on the responsible and representative roles of Christ,” to borrow a phrase from Rowan Williams. Sobrino also, it will be remembered, describes the following of Christ in terms of enacting the “discipleship of Christ.”¹⁵² The confession of Christ, he maintains, essentially includes its enactment “by being of such a type and acting in such a way” that in turn gives credence to the truth of the confession about Christ.¹⁵³ And this being and acting like Christ is what a transformative Christology needs to pay attention to in order, not only to get to know Christ better, but contribute in the transformation of society in Africa.¹⁵⁴

There are two points I would like to mention about the possibility, and the primary direction of following Christ or taking on his roles. Concerning the first point, it is possible in the first place for individual believers or community of believers to take up the representative role and place of Jesus Christ as healer, liberator, and king through the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit released into the community of those associated with Jesus Christ constitutes the community into what can be described as Christ’s spiritual progeny. So that what happened and happens in Jesus’ life can happen in and through the lives of the individuals or communities that confess him in such images. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses: “Jesus Christ is the one whom the Father anointed with the Holy Spirit and established as priest, prophet, and king. The whole people of God participate in these three offices of Christ and bears the responsibilities for mission and service that flow from them” by the same Spirit.¹⁵⁵ The Second Vatican Council emphasized the universal call of every Christian to exercise the healing, liberating and kingly roles of Christ rooted in the grace of baptism.¹⁵⁶ So, every baptised person is conformed to Christ – healer, liberator, and king.

The second point is about the path in following Christ as healers, as liberators, and as servant-kings. Following Christ entails “walking with the poor,” walking closely with those who are sick, who suffer injustice, and who are marginalized and excluded from the Kingdom experience of abundant life.¹⁵⁷ As Rowan Williams put it, following Christ involves “following so as to be in the same place as the Master.”¹⁵⁸ And the place is “in the

¹⁵¹ Wright, *Simply Christian*, xi. See also N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1995). See also Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (London: SPCK 2016), 9-11.

¹⁵² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 29.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, *Jesus the Liberator*, 30.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ CCC, nos. 783-786.

¹⁵⁶ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 10.

¹⁵⁷ Jon Sobrino, “Christian Spirituality: The Following of Jesus in the Option for the Poor – “Spirituality and the Following of Jesus,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 686-688. See also Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Revised ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 72-76; Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1982), 7-12; and Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block, eds., *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

¹⁵⁸ Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples*, 10.

company of the people whose company Jesus seeks and keeps...the company of the excluded, the disreputable, the wretched, the self-hating, the poor, the diseased.”¹⁵⁹ What do these insights mean or entail, specifically, for Christian living and responsibility in the social context of Africa. How can Christians imitate Christ’s own healing, liberating, and kingly role? In what concrete ways do they become healers, liberators, and servant-kings to one another, and in becoming so contribute to the transformation of lives and societies? That is the reflection in the following subsections.

3.2.1. *Christian the Healer*

Nigerian theologian, Stan Chu Ilo, proposes a Christian healing praxis that is holistic and transformative following the pattern of Jesus’ healing ministry. I find his proposal illuminative. According to Ilo, the Christian invocation of Christ the healer is a challenge to the church and her ministers as well as all Christians, who have been transformed by the love of Christ to become themselves agents of his healing.¹⁶⁰ Ilo, like other theologians, understands the Christian existence as the embodiment and enactment of Christ’s healing presence and action among people.¹⁶¹ He describes the approach for fulfilling this healing responsibility in what he refers to as the “biosocial theological approach”.¹⁶² The approach consists in the critical and discerning art of accompaniment towards the sick and wounded members of our society.¹⁶³ This accompaniment, in Ilo’s view, is rooted in the “incarnational principle of totally identifying with the other person in need in order to experience (or participate in) what the other is suffering.”¹⁶⁴ The accompaniment also “requires humility, listening to the other person, honest communication, conversion, openness of heart, and genuine spiritual encounters.”¹⁶⁵ These are the kenotic attitudes, and “dispositions”, to use Sobrino’s favourite word, of vulnerability, which is characteristic of a Christian who is called and graced to embody and to live the life of Christ the healer. They are the attitudes by which the Christian is able to identify “the hidden wounds of those

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶⁰ Ilo, “Search for Healing in a Miraculous Stream,” in *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion*, 74.

¹⁶¹ For a constructive socio-theological narration of the example and life of such a transformed Christian who embodies and enacts Christ’s healing identity and work, see Dorcas Olubanke Akintude, “Women as Healers: The Nigerian (Yoruba) Example,” 157-172; and Fulata Lusungu Moyo, “Navigating Experiences of Healing: A Narrative Theology of Eschatological Hope as Healing,” 243-260, in Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, eds., *African Women, Religion, and Health*.

¹⁶² Ilo, “Search for Healing in a Miraculous Stream,” 74. Esther Acolatse has herself adopted such twofold orientation in exploring an integrated pastoral approach to healing, deliverance, and other related social issues among Christians in Ghana. She draws upon insights from Karl Barth and Carl Jung to propose a theological-psychological approach to the pastoral care of the sick and vulnerable. For a synthesis of her proposal, see Acolatse, “Toward a Model for Pastoral Counselling,” in *For Freedom or Bondage?*, 173-208. This approach is not entirely new. It had been proposed also by Elochukwu Eugene Uzukwu in his essay, “Health, Healing and Christianity in Africa: African Traditional Practices,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, ed. Daniel Patte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 496. See also Elochukwu Uzukwu, Chris Ukachukwu Manus and Luke Mbefo, eds., *Healing and Exorcism: The Nigerian Experience* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 1992).

¹⁶³ Ilo, “Search for Healing in a Miraculous Stream,” 74.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

who seek for God in the dark waters of life and those who...are seeking for healing in the muddy waters of *odomiri Bethsaida*.”¹⁶⁶ To be sure, these attitudes have powerful healing effect upon many people in Africa who are wounded, not just physically, but also, psychologically and socially.

There is a christological presupposition for the Christian identity and role as healer. Stephan van Erp in the essay already cited fills it out. His insights could be read as drawing on the implication of our christological model of Christ’s incarnate divinity, which is consubstantial to, and in con-causality with, the Christian life. Van Erp expresses it this way:

“Christian life dwells in a body of broken bones that does not cease to resurrect against suffering and injustice. It seeks to heal, not by being an identifiable unity, but instead by a call to respond, by its awareness of mutual dependency, its laments and prayers, and its acts of mercy.”¹⁶⁷

Albert Nolan renders these christological presuppositions in terms of what he aptly describes as “a spirituality of healing.”¹⁶⁸ He also discusses how the cultivation of this spirituality of healing bears a deeply personal and socially transformative significance.¹⁶⁹ The Christian, Nolan says, is a wounded-healer. He or she shares in the brokenness of other human beings and yet is a beneficiary of Christ’s healing and restorative mercy. The experience of vulnerability and empowerment is what positions the Christian to become, like Christ, a source of life, health, and strength to others.

3.2.2. *Christian the Liberator*

What it means that African Christians are called to share, or rather, live out Christ’s liberating mission entails two things. First, it involves helping other human beings to recognise themselves as those who have been liberated in Christ. Second, it is to help others imagine themselves as liberating agents, who are imbued with the same Spirit of Christ in order to liberate their other fellow human beings. This deeper understanding of the role of the Christian as liberator is not fully explored in the Christian and theological context. What is mainly heard are moral exhortations to Christians to live as Christ the liberator by carrying out acts of charity, or the fulfilment of a pre-conceived agenda of emancipation.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Van Erp, “Christ, the Stranger,” 276. See also Urbaniak, “Extending and Locating Jesus’s Body: Toward a Christology of Radical Embodiment,” precisely his discussion of the idea that “Jesus’s body is located in broken African Bodies,” 782-790.

¹⁶⁸ Albert Nolan, “A Spirituality of Healing,” in *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, 107-119; idem, “Praxis – Healing,” in *Jesus Before Christianity: The Gospel of Liberation*, 30-36.

¹⁶⁹ Nolan, “Personal Transformation Today,” in *Jesus Today*, 121-170. I have explored some of the ideas that he also refers to in his own discussion. Some of the ideas include contemplative practice as a space for enhancing relationship with Christ and other human beings, the Christian sense of shared brokenness which inspires us to openness and dependency as a space for experiencing the healing that comes from Christ and my fellow human beings. For more on the socially transformative potential of Christian vocation as healer, see Paul Farmer, “Health, Healing and Social Justice: Insights from Liberation Theology,” in *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis book, 2013), 35-70.

The greater challenge in living as liberator, in identification with Christ, is in helping other human beings become not only liberated from the structures of injustice, but to also become themselves agents of liberation unto themselves and unto others in every event of encounter with and among them. In other words, it is about forming and transforming Christians to be “icons of liberation,” to borrow a phrase from Orobator.¹⁷⁰ This guarantees sustained justice and freedom, which are not dependent on the powers of the political representatives, but on social habits of relation among ordinary people in their day to day endeavours.

3.2.3. *Christian the Servant-King*

The image of Christ the king and of his kingdom, as presented in the previous chapters, point not just to the experience of Christians, but also to “the message that Christians are confronted with when they make the radical option for faith in Jesus who is the Christ.”¹⁷¹ By the grace of their living relationship with Christ, Christians are challenged, and are able at the same time, to take on the kingly mission and praxis of Jesus Christ. This mission and praxis, as we had elaborated (see subsection 4.2.2. of chapter 3) has the potential to bring about the transformation of society. The King whom Christians proclaim, which theologians reflect about, and the church serves, is a King whose crown was made of thorns, and that he still wears his crown of thorns even at the right hand of the Father, from where he continues to reign for the redemption of humankind.

This mention of redemption of humankind leads me to cite the first encyclical letter of John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, “Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of Man [Humankind],” for a further understanding of how Christians are to fulfil their role as servant-kings. In the letter, John Paul offers a moving reflection on how Christians can embody and enact the kingly role and mission of Christ.¹⁷² According to the Pope, Christians share in Christ’s kingly mission by first, rediscovering in themselves and in others the special dignity of their own kingship. This means the exercise of the kingly role consists in the uncommon act of seeing, the act of recognition. In addition to this acknowledgement of their common dignity, the Pope mentions that the kingly identity of Christians are expressed in the “readiness to serve, in keeping with the example of Christ, who ‘came not to be served but to serve.’”¹⁷³ He describes further in what sense, and how, Christians can take on such representative role as king. The Pope writes:

“In the light of this attitude of Christ, being a king is truly possible only by being a servant. ...[B]eing a servant demands so much spiritual maturity that it must really be described as being a king. In order to be able to serve others worthily and effectively we must be able to master ourselves, possess the virtues that makes this mastery possible. For our sharing in Christ’s kingly mission, his “kingly function” (*munus*) is closely linked with every sphere of both Christian and human morality.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *Unsung Icons of Liberation*, 2018 Lecture on Theology of Liberation in the African Context, Centre for Liberation Theologies, KU Leuven.

¹⁷¹ Orobator, “The Idea of the Kingdom of God in African Theology,” 327.

¹⁷² John Paul II, “The Christian Vocation to Service and Kingship,” in *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 21.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

In what concrete places can Christians exercise these healing, liberating and servant-kingly responsibilities of Christ? A response to this question leads me to the next subsection. There I shall discuss three places in which these mandates of the ordinary everyday Christian living can be exercised. A discussion of such places is important for offering the basic human locatedness of a societal transformation that is grounded on the incarnate divinity of Christ.

3.3. Within the Structures of Everyday Life

My focus here is to explain *where*, for me, in the African context, the transformative confession of faith in Jesus Christ should begin and be fostered. And for me, it ‘*begins at home*,’ in those basic structures of human encounter against the dominant idea and feeling that the confession of one’s faith, the exercise of hope, and the practice of love in Christ is only legitimately done in the churches. In fact many African Christians, in the name of ‘following Christ’, do not appreciate that the basic domains of everyday routine human living are christological spaces of social transformation. Where churchgoing and giving of one’s time and treasure, have been made to displace the christological act of being-for-the-other within the basic structures of everyday Christian living, which are in themselves spaces of witness and discipleship. In stirring unambiguity Rowan Williams, referring mainly to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s christological *Ethics*, makes the point so well: “It should be clear that relatedness to God [Christ] does not simply displace finite solidarities.”¹⁷⁵ This also does not mean “reducing relation with God to such finite solidarities.”¹⁷⁶

With that said, nevertheless, the fact remains, as Williams fleshes out, that mutual participation within the structures of the “routine human life” (and he names three – work, family, political society) is “a mediation of participation in divine life,” the life of Christ.¹⁷⁷ Such that “the life of grace appears as – and even becomes – the life of ‘mandated’ human sociality...now revealed as the vehicles of God’s own life among us.”¹⁷⁸ Williams goes on to explain the idea, which I would like to cite at length here.

“What this means in practice is that what [is] called routine life is understood and judged according to its openness to the christological reality out of which ultimately it arises. The mandates exist in order to provide human existence with a structure that will eventually appear as the structure of Christ’s own life, Christ’s being-for-the-other. Thus, where the interdependence of human life shows the radical quality of Christ’s responsibility and representation, where familial, political, or cultural action realizes a more and more unqualified degree of being-for-the-other, it becomes a manifestation of Christ’s underlying and ongoing agency....The christological transformation of humanity (and society) is the transformation of *all* our constitutive relationships as

¹⁷⁵ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 204. It is interesting to note that the ethical ideas of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are grounded on the christological model of “incarnate deity,” a mode of Christ’s life and “existence as unreservedly ‘for others’.” And this resonates with the Sobrinoian christological model of “incarnate divinity,” as we have discussed in section 4 of chapter 3. Williams argues that the christological model is the “foundation for an ethical and spiritual interpretation of the Church’s identity...and a reinforced sense of Christian vocation and social engagement.” See Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 166-167.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 204

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

humans so that they are now able to move more freely towards the maximal for-
otherness.”¹⁷⁹

I shall reflect, in what follows, on the understanding of these insights within the three basic human structures – family, human work, and ecclesial-social communities, hazarding some ethical and social implications in the African context. For this I shall draw heavily on insights from the Catholic social thought and its reception in the works of various authors.

3.3.1. Social Transformation Begins in the Family

Charity, they say, begins at home. Home is the locale where the individual experience well-being and grow in the awareness of what a good and flourishing life and society means. This is thanks to their own experience of that flourishing which begins with life in the most basic human institution, the family. The family is a prime christological domain for the transformation of society, and so, should be promoted in Africa as such.¹⁸⁰ John Paul was right when he said that “in Africa in particular, the family is the foundation on which the social edifice is built.”¹⁸¹ He had earlier described it as “as the basic social community, or ‘cell of society’.”¹⁸² That is why in the quest for social transformation, significant attention, or “major priority” must be given to the family so that it can assume and fulfils its rightful place and role as the prime “active subject” in the work of societal transformation.¹⁸³

This appreciation of the family as such is all the more urgent in the present African ecclesial-social context where the care for family seems to receive a misplaced and little or no attention, sometimes even in the name of following Christ. The christological spirituality of societal transformation that recognizes the place of the family demands a fresh understanding of the family as God’s church rather than simply the notion of the church as God’s family. In the light of this understanding a parent dedicated to or who has given themselves in self-donation to the utmost care of their family begins to appreciate this as a profoundly christological act in itself. I cannot recall hearing any sermon or fund-raising in most churches that are solely directed to the enhancement of the family as a prime christological space for social transformation. In most churches in Africa, Christians are encouraged to “pay tithe” or to give generously for the maintenance of the ecclesial institutions. A christological understanding of the family as the basic social community will demand reconsidering and prioritizing the fact that the care of family is itself a deeply christological act.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ See Paulinus Ezeokafor, Lenten Pastoral Letter, “The Family: ‘Foundation Once Destroyed, What Can the Just Do?’ (Ps. 11:3),” (Okpuno: Fides Communications, 2015).

¹⁸¹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 79

¹⁸² John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 33.

¹⁸³ See also Thomas Massaro, “Promoting Healthy Family Life in Challenging Times,” in *Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 97-117.

3.3.2. Human Work and the Economy of Societal Transformation

The present section turns to the topic of work. Promoting labour justice, that is, giving every person access to decent work for a living has long been at the heart of the tradition of Catholic teachings.¹⁸⁴ This is then to say, that another concrete manner in which Christians live out their christological identity is through their work, their labour – in the farms, in the factories, in offices, in the markets, and other workplaces where they typically spend half or more of their waking hours. As we saw in the first chapter, these places are also sites of the vibrant experience and proclamation of Christ’s identity and work in African context. This understanding entails an urgent attention to the issue of work and labour in the African context. Such attention, in the line of our reflections so far, is a christological imperative that is at the heart of the church’s proclamation of Christ and the social change he brings. The attention could be in that the Jesuit moral theologian, Thomas Massaro, talks about, in his reflection on Pope Francis’s social teachings and the style of his commitment towards the promotion of labour justice in a globalised economic order. Massaro writes: “If a church leader plans to utter a word of hope for ordinary people facing harsh economic forces, then a message about alleviating work and labour related injustices must be part of the message.”¹⁸⁵

Such words of hope are all the more urgent in Africa where a vast majority of young and adult persons are jobless, and painfully so due to the irresponsibility of those who pose themselves as leaders. That is why more than just words of hope, actions of hope and support by Christian leaders for people are very important. Such actions and support challenge the church in Africa to broaden her apostolic mission as social service providers and to become more involved in what could be described as social impact investment.¹⁸⁶

3.3.3. Ubuntu and Christian Social Participation

Deeply engrained in the African consciousness is the appreciation for community. This community is not simply a place where people with a particular common interests gather or meet. In Africa, community is appreciated in terms of the experience of communion and harmony. It is the experience of fostering well-being. It is in this sense that Jean Marc Éla’s description of human community as a sacrament can be rightly understood.¹⁸⁷ For Éla, and rightly so, the human, social community is an ecclesial reality, within which people strive “to live out the values of the Kingdom.”¹⁸⁸ In fact, he describes a truly human community as “the gospel community where men and women take charge of their lives and their

¹⁸⁴ See Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, (Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 2004), 144-176, at 173-174. See also John Paul II, Encyclical Letter “Human Work: On the Ninetieth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum, Laborem Exercens*,” 14 September, 1981. *AAS* 73 (1981): 577-647, at 600-602.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Massaro, “Promoting Labour Justice in a Globalized Economic Order,” in *Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis*, 45-67.

¹⁸⁶ See Ilo, “Illuminative Ecclesiology, the Church’s Social Mission, and Social Transformation in Africa,” in *A Poor and Merciful Church*, 173-227, at 202-211.

¹⁸⁷ Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 6-7.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7

future.”¹⁸⁹ Hence the African concept of community as ubuntu is very illuminating for appreciating the community as a place for advancing the transformation of the larger social sphere. The concept is premised on the accessibility of institutions of open and public conversation. It also draws attention to the need for the preservation of such durable environment for such social discourse, where every voice is heard and taken into account. What could be more christological than this: the creation of an environment where each and every member of the human community is allowed to lend a voice to the Word that is among them and that has the power to transform their lives and the social space they inhabit. Such environment for open and honest discourse becomes in itself a community of “social discernment,” to use a phrase from Peter Henriot.¹⁹⁰ And the goal, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, is to learn and share christological wisdom for advancing the good of all in the society.

4. Further Import of the Relation between Christ and Social Transformation

The exploration of the relation between Christ and social transformation has consequences, obviously, for the development of a Christology of social transformation, or what I prefer to call a transformative Christology. I suggest here three, among other areas of focus, where the consequences of a transformative Christology could be filled out further. The areas are these: (1) how Christology itself can be understood today (2) reinforcing and broadening the social mission of the church in Africa on the basis of this new understanding or meaning of Christology, and (3) on the possibility of integrating a Christocentric vision and ethics in the social sphere as an import of the understanding. These three can be considered as the dimensional features of a transformative Christology.

4.1. Reconceiving Christology (in Africa): Towards a Socially Transformative Christology

It appears that for a long time, Christology in Africa has been concerned about its academic reputation, and the effort to ‘catch-up’ with the so-called classical meaning of Christology, and way of christologizing in other parts of the world, particularly, in Europe and North America. The meaning and approach to Christology are often determined and dominated by Western epistemologies. They are also marked by a certain transcendentalist and rationalistic orientations. So, some African theologians are still being concerned with offering christological reflections that would be comparable in terms and amplitude to the Christology of the Western church, academia, and society. Similar tendency is found among many ecclesiastics for whom Christology is more about the list of doctrinal statements about Jesus to be memorized so as to show that it is in the plan of God that Christianity would supplant the traditional religious belief system. This list has also a

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Peter Henriot, “Social Discernment and the Pastoral Circle,” in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, ed. Frans Wijssen, Peter Henriot and Rodrigo Mejía (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 37-48.

polemical barb because it is deployed to delegitimize other Christian groups in the effort to prove themselves right, ‘bible-believing’ or ‘orthodox’, as it is often expressed.

However, my study in the present research “offers a set of language practices,” – in terms of our christological notions of embodied relationship, engaged agency, and enacted practices of solidarity – for rethinking Christology and how to do it in Africa, for the love and life of its suffering people.¹⁹¹ In other words, the relation of christological belief to social transformation, or rather, the task of exploring the theological-practical connection between faith in Jesus Christ and the commitment to societal transformation, opens up an insight into the meaning of Christology as a whole. It also sheds light on the possibility and manner of pursuing a social transformation-oriented Christology.

Of the first, that is, on the meaning of Christology, one is able to reconceive it as the art of discerning how Christ transforms the social order by means of an individual’s or community of believers’ loving relationship with Christ and with other people, and in the embodied practices of solidarity as the outworking of this relationship. Christology is, thus, seen as tracing how Christ, at all sorts of different levels, makes the social sphere a space of transforming relationship with himself and with other human beings. Still in this sense, but put in other terms, Christology becomes the art of participating in, or collaborating with, the socially transformative act of Christ in the Spirit.

Drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Christology Lectures* and his *Ethics*, Rowan Williams expatiates this meaning of Christology as the art of learning how to “take on the vicarious representative and responsible role of Christ for other lives” in the social sphere. This idea is similar to Kasper’s view when he says: “The actual meaning of a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and of christological teaching is only apparent if we inquire into the liberating and redemptive (transformative) meaning of Jesus.”¹⁹² Likewise, for Sobrino, the important aspect of Christology as *intellectus gratiae* and *intellectus amoris* lies, above all, in how it affects Christian identity and inspires a commitment of love, compassion and justice towards all human beings and in the social order.¹⁹³ This idea is further articulated by Sobrino in his essay on Systematic Christology.¹⁹⁴ In it Sobrino writes as follows:

“The ultimate finality of Christology, as of all Christian activity, is the maximal building of the Reign of God... Therefore it [Christology] understands itself as a theory of praxis, an *intellectus amoris*, which must be historicized as *intellectus iustitiae*. This being the case, Christology in the concrete must develop and supply a knowledge concerning Christ that by its nature will further the Reign of God... this knowledge of Christ must be a knowledge of liberation, *intellectus liberationis* .”¹⁹⁵

It follows, then, that any rethinking of Christology in Africa would not be a completed effort unless it sheds light on the task of Christology, that is, on what Christology should

¹⁹¹ I am indebted to Jacob Lett for the phrase in quotes. See Jacob Lett, Review of *Christ the Heart of Creation*, by Rowan Williams, *Religion and Theology* 26 (2019): 729-731. See also Imbelii, “Christian belief requires transformation, not facile compromise.”

¹⁹² Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 10.

¹⁹³ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 53. See also Sobrino, “Theology in a Suffering World: Theology as *Intellectus Amoris*,” in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 27-46.

¹⁹⁴ Sobrino, “Systematic Christology: Jesus Christ, the Absolute Mediator of the Reign of God,” 124-145.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

do, or what it means to do or practice Christology in Africa today.¹⁹⁶ For this, I should like to cite at some length, Rowan Williams’ concluding reflections in elucidation of where and how a transformative Christology happens or is performed. Williams writes:

“...Christology, in short, is done in the practice of a community that understands itself to be the Body of Christ, a group of persons living and acting from the conviction that human community is most fully realized in the unconditional mutuality which is represented by the language of organic interdependence. Christology is done in the practice of lives that embrace their finitude and materiality without fear, lives that enact the divine self-identification with those who endure loss, pain and contempt. Christology is done in a practice of prayer and worship that does not approach God as a distant and distinct individual with a will to which mine must conform – as if in a finite relation of slave to master – but acts out of the recognition of adoptive filiation and the intimacy that flows from this. It is done when we see that the doing of God’s will ‘in [sic] earth as in Heaven’ means that the eternal will of God is for the life of the world – that God is ‘satisfied’ when our flourishing is secured. Christology in this vein is the impetus for both the stillness and expectancy of prayer and the risk of action on behalf of the neglected or oppressed other.”¹⁹⁷

To rethink the meaning and task of Christology in Africa in these terms lead inexorably to a re-imagination of the mission of the church. In other words, Christology understood as such would, obviously, have consequences also for the mission of the church, the subject for discussion in the next subsection.

4.2. The Church African Christians Imagine: More Socially Responsible Church

It is a common understanding that Christology cannot be separated from ecclesiology, and vice-versa. In this light, Congolese theologian, Bénézet Bujo, was right in his assertion that, “questions about the organization of the Christian community can only be answered in the light of the person of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹⁸ It can also be said that reflections on the identity and work of Jesus Christ receive embodied translation primarily within the Christian community, “the spiritual progeny of Christ,” as described by Rowan Williams.¹⁹⁹ Hence, the relation between christological belief and social transformation, which we have been exploring along the lines of the three themes of relationship, agency and praxis, lead to a discussion of the mission of the church. More specifically, the exploration opens up to a reflection on how the social vocation and responsibility of ecclesial communities in African society can become more broadened and reinforced as a consequence of a more radically christological considerations. As a matter of fact, one of the foremost achievements of the Second Vatican Council was to uphold the inseparability of the church’s understanding of herself and of her evangelical mission with its commitment to transform the social order

¹⁹⁶ See also Atansi, “Contemplating Christ and/in His People: The Practice of a Social Transformation-Oriented Christology in Africa,” 283-305.

¹⁹⁷ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 250; also cited in Atansi, “Contemplating Christ and/in His People: The Practice of a Social Transformation-Oriented Christology in Africa,” 304-305.

¹⁹⁸ Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 92.

¹⁹⁹ See also Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 29.

for the good of each and every human person.²⁰⁰ So, the central argument here is that: Christ transforms or changes society through the representative role and actions of his Body the Church.

Many African theologians and ecclesiastics, including for example Elochukwu Uzukwu, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator and Matthew Kukah, have been devoted to working out this new way of being church in Africa.²⁰¹ However, there is a christological precept that is often unexplored in their ecclesiological projects. This precept helps in providing a solid foundation to their practical ecclesiological proposals, and a more fitting response to those who think that such proposals as theirs are merely another form of advocacy for social activism. Rowan Williams articulates the christological precept in these beautiful words:

“[A]ll that we say about Christology will be vacuous if it does not finally issue...in a reinforced sense of Christian possibility and Christian vocation, especially in the moral desert of modern ideology. And...following through these implications of Christological language should enable us more effectively to see classical Christology as the proper ground and focus of a whole theology of political and environmental engagement, since it establishes not only what we must say about the character of the triune Creator but also what we must say (and do) about being creatures,...‘deified’ by our communion with Christ in the Spirit.”²⁰²

Michael Cook evaluates African theologies in terms of this precept. He writes:

“In contemporary African theology, while there is great interest in Christology (although no single work treats it as completely as Sobrino’s works), there is far greater concern for engaging ecclesiology in the sense of a practical and effective embodiment of the risen Jesus in today’s world. For Jesus’ experience of Africa is not only mediated through the Spirit-inspired experiences of the people but precisely through the communities that profess to be his followers.”²⁰³

²⁰⁰ For a systematic theological discussion of this idea see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Church’s Religious Identity and Its Social and Political Mission,” *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 197-225. See also a discussion of the idea by Gerard Mannion in a recent work that was published shortly before his passing away. May God rest his soul! Gerard Mannion, “Foreword: The Socially Transformative Power of Ecclesiology: Why an Increased Understanding of the Church can Change Society,” in Idara Otu, *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation in African Catholicism: Between Vatican II and African Synod II*, ACSS 17 (Eugene OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), xi-xv; and by Titus S. Olorunnisola “The Church in Conversation for Social Transformation: From Christology to Christopraxis,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 3, no. 2 (2015): 65-72.

²⁰¹ Again, see, for example, Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in its Social Context* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 2000); idem, *From Crisis to Kairos: The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 2005); Matthew Hassan Kukah, *The Church and the Politics of Social Responsibility* (Lagos: Sovereign Prints Nig. Ltd., 2007); Jozef D. Zalot, *The Roman Catholic Church and Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: Voices Yet Unheard in a Listening World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002); E. Chukwudi Eze, “Sources of Social and Political Theology: Interrogating the African Experience,” *Transformation* 25.4 (October 2008):169-194; and Richard Adekoya, “The Church as a Stakeholder in the Socio-Political Development of Society: The Example of Nigeria,” *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 38:1 (2018): 50-63, to mention but a few of the sources.

²⁰² Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 167.

²⁰³ Cook, “The African Experience of Jesus,” 688.

The point here is that any fruitful and creative christological discourse like the one being advanced in the present research, and the reception or translation of the insights therefrom, will have to open up to some ecclesiological considerations. The considerations will not have to be in terms of another full-fledged investigation of “the function, meaning and theology of the church in Africa.”²⁰⁴ Much work has already been done in this regard.²⁰⁵ Rather, the ecclesiological considerations will be in terms of the fact that church is *a space* where the integrity of the christological insights – Christians’ relationship with Christ and with other human beings, their empowered agency, their embodied practices of solidarity – are guaranteed not as another set of dogmatic principles. The ecclesiological considerations here are not another instance in the exercise of magisterial responsibility as suggested by some African theologians.²⁰⁶

Drawing on the above-cited remarks by Rowan Williams and Michael Cook, I argue that the christological insights advanced in this dissertation help to broaden the understanding of the church’s mission as a community called to serve the good of other ‘ecclesial’ communities. By other “ecclesial communities”, I mean, for example, the family, the places of work, and the daily encounter amongst people, which I have discussed in the previous sections. In this profoundly christological sense, and as Williams, referring to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, puts it, “the Church in its social and embodied form...exists in order to guarantee the integrity of all other natural solidarities (family, politics, and work).”²⁰⁷ This means that, “the Church as a visible social unit is a locus from which the world can be seen as a whole and responded to with the wholeness of service and compassion.”²⁰⁸ The church is not there to jostle up against other social forms; nor seek to displace or control them.²⁰⁹ Rather it is there to help these other social forms, like family, politics, social entities, to exercise fully their agency, to manifest “the ultimate form of their own solidarity” as a unique and “explicit participation in the divine life that is the life of discipleship in the Body.”²¹⁰

And in the light of this broader and deeper christological understanding, the church becomes not simply an enclosure made up of people who share a particular belief. Rather,

²⁰⁴ Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*, 85.

²⁰⁵ See some works already cited in footnote reference no. 203, *supra*.

²⁰⁶ There have been debates about what should be the proper meaning and function of the Church in Africa. On the one hand there are theologians, people like the Dominican theologian, Anthony Akinwale, who contend that the Church exists to live out what he calls its “dogmatic responsibility.” See Anthony Akinwale, “African Theology and the Dogmatic Responsibility for the Christian God,” 212-246. See my critique of such views in footnote reference no. 64 in chapter 3. On the other hand, there are theologians, people like the Jesuit theologian, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, who uphold that it is proper to the Church’s ‘dogmatic’ responsibility to seek for justice and the transformation of a continent bedevilled. According to Orobator, “the church ought to be committed to the improvement of the social conditions of living men and women in the world as part of its evangelizing mission.” Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*, 252. See also Orobator (with Elias Omondi Opongo), *Faith Doing Justice: A Manual for Social Analysis, Catholic Social Teachings and Social Justice* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006). A reconciliatory third perspective could be read in the lines of John XIII’s Encyclical Letter “on Christianity and Social Progress, *Mater et Magistra*,” 15 May 1961, *AAS* 53 (1961): 401-464.

²⁰⁷ Williams, “Christology, Ethics and Politics: Discourses of Transformation” in *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 202.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

it is an organism, an organic entity that includes both places and event. In short, the church is an *event*. It is that reality which takes place; that reality which occurs or opens up in our midst; and so, is not just a geo-physical unit or an institution that is just out there, where people simply have to go to in order to fulfil religious obligations of a sort. The church rather *happens*, and it happens in in those places – particularly in the grassroots Christian communities – where the longing for life, goodness, truth and beauty is shared, fostered and realized.²¹¹

What am I talking about here in concrete terms? What forms would such ecclesiological considerations or implications of the relation between belief in Jesus Christ and social transformation take in African society? Am I suggesting that this is not the case yet in that context where there are many churches and church spaces? These are some of the questions which inform the rest of the discussion that follows in this subsection.

There is no doubt that the church is a very prominent part of many communities across the continent, and so bears a responsibility in the social ordering and life of the people, at least by the fact of its pervasiveness. It is important to remark that it is from within these ecclesial and social communities that the vibrant images of Christ as healer, liberator and king arise. However, there has been an understanding of the church's identity and mission which does not allow for a fulfilment of her social responsibilities in the light of these christological images. Consider, for example, comments from a prominent African (Nigerian) ecclesiastic, Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama, who is the President of the Regional Episcopal Conference of West Africa, known as RECOWA-CERAO, in a recent interview he granted while attending a meeting in the United Nations forum. In this capacity, he answered to the question that was posed at him about his vision of the church's social mission in these words:

“The Church deals in blessings, prayers, exhortations, and preaching. When it comes to such issues...we cannot do this all. When it comes to the environment, what can we say, except to tell the government that this needs to be done. I think the crisis can be solved if the government takes note of it. ...We want to see government succeed. I'm a pastor and a priest, and I don't want to be converted into a social worker. But right now, I am a pastor of souls, and some time I feel as if I am more a social worker than pastor of souls. That is the duty of government to take care of the needs of the people and to allow me time to focus on the salvation of souls.”²¹²

This is obviously a narrow view of the church's identity and mission. It is an example of the view by those, who think that social engagement is an “improper, impartial, and unofficial” mission of the church.²¹³ To be sure, the church cannot stop at “saving souls.” The church is not just about ‘spiritual’ work in the sense Kaigama tends to understand the idea of spiritual. The church's proclamation of Christ, and its work for the coming of God's kingdom in the wider society, has an inner worldly import and significance. It entails

²¹¹See the discussion in subsection 3.3. above.

²¹² Christopher White, “Nigerian Archbishop: We want government to succeed: Interview with Archbishop Ignatius Ayau Kaigama,” <https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2019/03/nigerian-archbishop-we-want-government-to-succeed/> [accessed 28 June, 2019].

²¹³ For a description and critique of such views – as upheld by Kaigama – see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Church's Religious Identity and Its Social and Political Mission,” 197-199.

bringing healing, liberation, social change, order and prosperity in the present life for people. This ought to be so by the fact of its uniquely christological (incarnational) identity. A deeper understanding of the meaning and import of this identity in relation to Christ makes clear that the church cannot withdraw from the world and its affairs. This to say, the church’s mission has everything to do with the ordering of society.

Jon Sobrino’s words also serve as a fitting response to this narrow view of the Church’s identity and mission. His words offer perspectives for relating the social mission of the Church to her christological identity, and in so doing, shore up the grounding for the exercise of its social mission. According to Sobrino the Church is the disciple of Christ and must *enact* this discipleship. In being and doing this, “the church becomes a sacrament in relation to Christ and ultimately becomes his body in history.”²¹⁴ Citing Ellacuría, Sobrino clearly makes the point that, “the historical bodiliness of the church implies that the reality and the action of Jesus Christ is ‘fleshed out’ in it so that the church may perform an ‘incorporation’ of Jesus Christ in the reality of history.”²¹⁵ That is why the church, as Sobrino maintains, “is the setting of the embodiment of Christ.”²¹⁶ And that is the Church African Christians imagine.²¹⁷ The Church that densely embodies Christ’s healing, liberating, and transforming mission.

As Pope Pius XI exhorted in *Rerum Ecclesia*, the Church must heal the sick, show loving compassion towards children, attend readily to the needs of the poor and the marginalised.²¹⁸ In fact, Pius had enjoined that “institutions for the welfare of the bodies of people be erected...in every town.”²¹⁹ In addition to these, he emphasized the need for the formation of people and transformation of their societies through formalised education, “particularly in the arts and sciences and in the professions.”²²⁰ This subject was also discussed with so much emphasis in the document of the Second Vatican Council – the “Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*.”²²¹ In it the council fathers drew attention to the fact that the Church is driven in her missionary commitment by a concern for social transformation. The Church’s exercise of this concern towards the well-being of people and transformation of their society, consists in “rightly regulating the affairs of social and economic life,” devotion “to the education of children and young people,”

²¹⁴ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 29.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ See Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, “Introduction: Reading the Times for Signs of the Future,” in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016) xv-xxxi. See also Emmanuel Katongole, “‘A Different World Right Here, A World Being Gestated in the Deeds of the Everyday’: The Church within African Theological Imagination,” *Missionalia* 30, no. 2 (2002): 206-234; idem, “The Sacrifice of Africa: Ecclesial Radiances of ‘A Different World Right Here’ – A Response to Anne Arabome, Elias Bongmba and John Kiess,” *Modern Theology* 30:2 (2014): 421-430.

²¹⁸ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, “On Catholic Mission, *Rerum Ecclesiae*,” 28 February, 1926, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_28021926_rerum-ecclesiae.html [accessed 3 June, 2019], no. 30-31.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Vatican Council II, “Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, 7 December, 1965,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman Tanner, vol. 2 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), no. 12. Hereafter *Ad Gentes*.

“working toward the uplifting of human dignity, and toward better living conditions.”²²² The council fathers even encouraged Christians to bring their acts together and to join forces with different groups of people in the commitment to social transformation.

“Let Christians take part in the strivings of those peoples who, waging war on famine, ignorance, and disease, are struggling to better their way of life and to secure peace in the world. In this activity, the faithful should be eager to offer prudent aid to projects sponsored by public and private organizations, by governments, by various Christian communities, and even by non-Christian religions.”²²³

In drawing attention to these pre-conciliar and conciliar exhortations, I am not suggesting a replacement of the evangelistic mission and task of the Church by a campaign of societal transformation. That is not what the exhortations by the Pope or the Council Fathers were meant to inspire. I am only arguing that the Church’s proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ has a transforming significance *per se* for the society in which the life and message of Christ is proclaimed. The Church’s radical commitment to social change is a christological participation and act, as I already explained in the third chapter. By this commitment as a christological participation, I mean that the effort to bring about the transformation of society for the well-being of all ought to be understood as a participation *par excellence* in the life and mission of Christ. I think this reaffirms the essential correlation between the Christ-event and the event of societal change for human flourishing, or more precisely, of the pursuit of a transformed human society and the mission of Christ. For Christ is glorified, and his reign is made more manifest, when our human well-being and flourishing are guaranteed and promoted. The commitment to social responsibility is the way the church and her members can witness to the transforming presence and action of Christ.²²⁴ It is another very concrete way that the church responds to its vocation to participate in and collaborate with Christ’s transforming presence and act towards a society *imaging* his own life.

As we saw from our study, Sobrino, drawing on a line in *Gaudium et Spes*, explains that the historical realities of the people of God, the events that characterise their daily life and struggles, could be understood as the sign of the times.²²⁵ He also maintains that even in this first sense these signs could be appreciated as christological sources and the setting for christological thinking, within the framework of the Ellacurían understanding of historical realities. Sobrino also maintains that these realities call the church forth to recognize them, examine them, and give pastoral response to them. If the historical realities are the signs of the times, which always make christological knowing and believing credible, it means that a response to these realities is a sign of a living church. Sobrino articulates his understanding of this living church in what he calls “primary ecclesiality.” Consider how he elucidates the idea:

²²² *Ad Gentes*, no. 12.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ See Sobrino, “Jesus’ Approach as a Paradigm for Mission.” 85-98.

²²⁵ See the discussion in subsection 2.4.1a of chapter 3, in which I trace the conciliar lines of the development of Sobrino’s christological project, particularly in *Gaudium et Spes*.

“By ‘primary ecclesiality,’ I mean that the ecclesial substance is embodied in the church, that in it real faith, hope, and charity are put into practice; in christological terms, discipleship of Christ is enacted. In doing and being this, the church becomes a sacrament in relation to Christ and ultimately becomes his body in history. “The historical bodiliness of the church implies that the reality and the action of Jesus Christ is ‘fleshed out’ in it so that the church may perform an ‘incorporation of Jesus Christ in the reality of history.’” First and foremost, in this sense, the church is the setting of faith in Christ and of the embodiment of Christ.”²²⁶

These insights underscore the fact that the commitment to social transformation is the sign of a truly *living* church, and which in turn makes the church “a real setting for Christology.”²²⁷ The idea has also enormous implications for the life and mission of the church as agent of social transformation. I will just cite one instance of such implications: on the use and distribution of ‘its’ resources.

In many churches in Africa, their life and resources seem to be organized and used, respectively, with a sense that the church is itself a separate system. However, a christological rethinking of the church’s social identity, and a re-envisioning of her social mission, would entail, for instance, that the church prioritizes the fact that its resources are not simply used for institutional upkeep. Rather, the resources should be used mainly for the service of the poor and the care of the less privileged. Only after these have been taken care of duly, should it consider the maintenance of institutions. This view is in line with the christological datum (we had earlier spelt out) that the personality and existence of Christ, whose body the church is, is unreservedly for the other and directed entirely to the service of the Kingdom of justice.

To round off the slightly long discussion in this subsection, I should emphasize that to say Africans imagine a more socially responsible church is also suggest to that the church ought to rediscover its contemplative roots and “to promote the contemplative practice” without which it cannot truly engage and transform the continent by her own social commitment. Rowan Williams beautifully reflects on this idea in the following words:

“The human face that Christians want to show to the world is a face marked by justice and love, and thus a face formed by contemplation, by the disciplines of silence and detaching of the self. If evangelisation is a matter of showing the world the ‘unveiled’ human face that reflects the face of the Son turned towards the Father, it must carry with it a serious commitment to promoting and nurturing such prayer and practice... This is to insist that the clarity and energy the church needs for doing justice requires making space for truth, for God’s reality to come through. Otherwise our search for justice, our work for societal transformation, becomes another exercise of human will, undermined by human self-deception. The two callings are inseparable, the calling to ‘prayer and to righteous action’. ... True prayer purifies the motive, true justice for the well-being of all is the necessary work of sharing and liberating in others the humanity we have discovered in our contemplative encounter.”²²⁸

Hence, it is in a contemplative mode of being in the world, and with a contemplative vision – the gaze of loving compassion – towards every human being, that the church will be able

²²⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 29.

²²⁷ Ibid., 28. See our discussion of this idea in Sobrino under section 3.2.2. of chapter three.

²²⁸ Williams, “Contemplation and Mission,” in *Holy Living: Christian Tradition for Today*, 98-99.

to remain true to its mission. In other words, contemplation is an intrinsic element in the transforming process of becoming a new person or community – in communion with Christ and with others – and subsequently the transforming mission of the church. This mission, as bears repeating, is deeply socially transformative as it is christological.

4.3. Inclusion of a Christocentric Vision and Ethic in the Social Sphere

The third dimension of a transformative Christology that I suggest here has to do with the place of a Christ-centred vision and ethic in a religiously pluralistic African society. By extension, the dimension deals with the role of followers of Christ in such a context. Thus, I am concerned with negotiating, and possibly, integrating the principles of Christian faith in both private and public spaces. Such consideration takes seriously the fact that the public space is an arena where christological belief is enacted. The purpose of upholding such views, and insisting on them in the discussion that will follow, is to argue against both the exclusion of Christian faith in particular, or religious belief in general, from the public square, and also against the dominance of one particular belief in the square. There is another issue that requires the discussion of this dimension of a transformative Christology. I highlighted the issue already while referring to the limited and limiting perspective of theologians and ecclesiastics on the social mission of the church. It remains the fact that many Christian churches and the adherents of Christian beliefs are not certain or confident about their place and role in the social sphere. They are not too sure what should be the nature of the perspectives to bring in the conversation about the transformation of society.²²⁹

In addition to this challenge of Christians' uncertainty about their place and role in the social sphere, the idea persists in many quarters that Christian faith (should) have no place in society, and that the church should not get involved in public or social affairs. One would expect that this pushback will be coming from those who do not share any form of religious beliefs, or who are advocates of the so-called secularist views. Surprisingly, the idea is upheld by theologians and some church leaders, some of whom I already mentioned, who criticise theologians and other Christian leaders for getting too involved in political and social issues. For instance, some theologians are critical of "a theological discourse that is so concerned with the situation of the African that it forgets to speak about God, or if at all it speaks about God, it does not speak of God as revealed by Christ."²³⁰ They feel such theological discourse abdicates what they consider to be the primary task of theology, which, according to them, is the fulfilment of "dogmatic responsibility for the Christian God."²³¹

The situation of Christians that I referred to above, and the positions of theologians as regards the place of Christian faith and the reflections about faith in the public sphere,

²²⁹ See also Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Public Faith in Action: How to Think Carefully, Engage Wisely, and Vote with Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016). See also Julie Hanlon Rubio, "Practicing Faith in Public Life: Beginning with the Local," *Political Theology* 14, no. 6 (2013): 772-785.

²³⁰ See Anthony Akinwale, "African Theology and the Dogmatic Responsibility for the Christian God," 212-246, at 212. See also Michael Akpoghiran, "The Ambiguity of Theological Discourse in Nigeria," *The Nigerian Journal of Theology* 16 (2002): 27-42.

²³¹ Akinwale, "African Theology and the Dogmatic Responsibility for the Christian God," 212-246.

are quite challenging. For one, the challenge stems from the fact that Africa is a complexly pluralistic society on many lines. So, there are many shades to the argument, and it is beyond the scope of the present research to do justice to them all. Nevertheless, a socially transformative Christology that we pursue in this dissertation moves us towards making space for a Christ-centred vision and ethics in the public domain. The audacity for such move derives from the fact that the transformative Christology we describe here, as we have shown in the preceding sections, allows for an encounter (relationship) with every human person, all human beings, irrespective of one's religious tradition or belongingness (cf. 1 Thes 3:12). A transformative Christology inspires and fosters the dialogue with, openness to, and sharing with even a non-Christian and non-religious other in working for the consolidation of the social order.

Even at this, I do not suggest that the christological notions and practices be directly inserted into the social sphere. In other words, I am not addressing others who do not share belief in Jesus Christ in order to make such space for a Christocentric vision and praxis. Rather, I am by this fact challenging Christians, among whom I count myself, to rise up to the urgent task of embodying, engaging, and enacting the mode of Christ's life – which is a profoundly humanizing and transforming one – within the public, social sphere. Yet, such a recommendation as mine advanced here must face the vexing question already implicitly raised: How does the christological spirituality or the Christocentric vision and ethic of social transformation I am calling for, take into account advances in contemporary social theories, especially concerning the complexly pluralistic reality of African societies that challenge any particular religious imagination for its transformation?

Since I am not well-equipped to respond satisfactorily to such a question, I will refer to an example from which could be gleaned a Christocentric vision and ethic, which, at the same time, projects a socially inclusive value. The Christocentric vision gleaned from the example and the value it projects are no less social than the proposals of social theorists, who are themselves also concerned about societal transformation.²³² It is the example drawn from the parable of the Good Samaritan narrated by Christ himself in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 10:25-37). Notably, the pericope fits within the overall appeal of Luke's Gospel to the Christians' concern with social justice and its realization. So, it comes over pretty plainly as a projection of how Christians should embody, engage and enact the life of Christ, exemplified by the Samaritan, in the social context.²³³ The significance of the parable, according to Matthew Eggemeier, in his examination of Sobrino's analysis of the parable, "stems from the fact that it narrates the central concern of Jesus's life and ministry as primordial sensitivity (empathetic responsiveness) to the suffering of others."²³⁴

The parable is set within the context of the quest for the greatest commandment in the Law, the ultimate requirement in fulfilment of the legal codes of the land, of a nation-

²³² See, for example, Meredith T. Wilkinson and Karen A D'Angelo, "Community-Based Accompaniment and Social Work – A Complementary Approach to Social Action," *Journal of Community Practice* 25 (2019): 151-167.

²³³ See Jon Sobrino, "The Samaritan Church and the Principle of Mercy," in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, 15-26. See also Joseph Ratzinger, "The Good Samaritan," in *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, 194-201.

²³⁴ Eggemeier, "Seeing with the Eyes of the Samaritan: A Spirituality of Political Compassion," in "A Mysticism of Open Eyes," 49.

state. The story touches on the question of what should be “an authentic Christian response to suffering in the world,” or in the society in which Christians also live and labour.²³⁵ Jesus responds that it is *neighbourly love*, the kind that grows from or is an overflow of that loving relationship with God. In the next move, Jesus responds to the lawyer, who in my own analysis represents those who push against making space for a Christocentric vision and ethic in the public sphere, in the name of upholding what is considered to be “common” to all. Jesus’ response is offered in terms of “responsibility that takes place at the level of embodiment and demands immediate recognition.”²³⁶ A “form of ethics in which it is not possible to delimit or circumscribe the range of one’s responsibility.”²³⁷ “Instead,” Eggemeier rightly observes, “the sole criterion for action is the suffering of the other, a suffering for which one is responsible irrespective of whether the sufferer is neighbour, a stranger, or even an enemy.”²³⁸ Thus, Jesus offers the profoundest hint at an inclusive form of neighbourly love and its practice in the face of an existential situation of suffering and brokenness.

The inclusive form of the neighbourly love exemplified by the Good Samaritan, according to Eggemeier, while drawing on insights from Sobrino’s analysis, has a threefold logic:

“1) the encounter with the embodied suffering of the other makes an unconditional ethical demand on the subject; 2) in response to the encounter with the suffering of the other, the subject is called to a movement of self-abandonment or kenosis in which one relinquishes self-interest before the authority of the sufferer; 3) finally, the subject is called to respond with political compassion and structural mercy to those who suffer unjustly by engaging in the work of taking the crucified down from their crosses and by contesting those structures which cause the suffering of the innocent.”²³⁹

In the light of these insights, the Christocentric vision and ethics, which I argue need to be integrated into the social sphere towards the transformation of societies in Africa, are human person-oriented and empathy-laden. They re-centre the human person and compassion towards him or her in the very core of any project for societal transformation, and which Africa needs in order to evolve from its current social dysfunction. In other words, neighbourly compassion becomes the basic value that should be promoted in the social square, as a value that cuts across every authentic religious tradition or meaningful social imagination. Neighbourly compassion, which is at the heart of the Christocentric vision and ethic, “is not a question of applying abstract rules of justice or theories of morality to a concrete situation, but rather a question of opening one’s eyes to the ethical call that arises from the encounter with the embodied suffering of the other.”²⁴⁰

For Rowan Williams, the Christ-centred vision and ethics are not simply “about dramatic and solitary imagination and choices for individual good or evil but the steady

²³⁵ Eggemeier, “A Mysticism of Open Eyes,” 45.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

building of a culture of durable mutuality and compassion.”²⁴¹ They are not, Williams goes on, about “genius-driven or near-magical transmutations of (the social sphere) into some imagined semblance of divine glory and abundance, but the gift of unlocking in the most ordinary setting...the ‘*grace of sense*’ that allows it to be seen with durable, attentive love.”²⁴² The point here is that the vision of neighbourly love and the ethics of compassion towards the wounded members of our society are to be re-covered, re-thought and integrated as a way of living our humanity and sociality irrespective of one’s religious affinity.

The Samaritan traveller displays the possibility of this integration of Christocentric vision and ethics as a way of living our humanity more fully in the social sphere we inhabit together. He also shows why it is urgent in a society where many no longer consider it their duty to show empathy and humanity to a wounded person, rather than standing by and invoking the name of Christ in vain. That is not Christian confession of Christ and his divine healing (transforming) power; it is blasphemy when Christians simply invoke Christ in the face and/or scene of suffering experienced by a fellow human being. The christological imagination for social transformation in the light of this Christocentric proposal challenges Africans to think of a situation, in which Christians and non-Christians are encouraged to always pay critical-empathetic attention to issues of public health, public safety, life in freedom together, access to justice, inalienable human dignity and equality under law. For instance, Christians and non-Christians, inspired by the example of the Good Samaritan, would be taught and inspired to cultivate social habits for the enhancements of life. Also, they could be educated and formed to be able to administer succour in any situation of woundedness, instead of standing by the side to capture painful scenarios with their mobile phones while ranting the name of Jesus Christ the healer.

Of primary importance for the translation of this christological or Christocentric ethic is the explicit ethical teachings of the Christian faith about social issues. Such translation, however, is never in the name of upholding the precepts of one’s religious institution, which in such case is seen as a territory to be defended with such teachings. The translation of the Christocentric ethic is not also about the assertion of one’s righteousness. In this case, the effort will turn out to be another form of the exercise of the practical impulses for action founded in psychological and pragmatic contexts of the faith. Granted, it is true, the ethical teachings of the Christian faith offer sources for knowledge and provide resources for motivation and concrete actions. However, their integration in the public square ought to be seen “as the outworking of a transformation of human agency into a kind of life that is uninterruptedly embodied in Jesus.”²⁴³ This outworking is not to be understood in terms of the ability of the human agents or institutions to simply organize or control things. Rather, in a crucially important sense, the outworking entails leaving space for God to act within the world He created and inhabits, for God so loved and loves the world (cf. Jn 3:16). In other words, the Christocentric vision and ethic require being open to the transformation that God wishes to bring about in the world by sending His Son, the Word made flesh, to

²⁴¹ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 246-247.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 247. Italics mine.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

dwell and act among humans. Thus, our hearts and minds remain open to receive what Christ is doing for the re-ordering of our social life and sphere. Such that our self-generated ideas about societal transformation become taken up in Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit, the subject of our final analysis of the imports and dimensions of a transformative Christology.

5. The Working of the Spirit: Openness to How Christ Transforms the Social Order

I turn here to the Holy Spirit, the third Person in the Godhead, and the Spirit's activity in the world that which vivifies the ongoing work of Christ's transforming relationship, empowerment, and praxis, in the lives of individual believers, in the community of those who believe in Christ, and in the collective lives of people in society. For there is no experience in Christ, in time and in history, which is not mediated by the action of the Holy Spirit. Everything Christ accomplishes for us human and for our personal and social transformation is accomplished via the Spirit. As such, the Holy Spirit, as John Paul II puts it, "is an absolutely vital part of the mystery of Jesus and of the salvation...he brings."²⁴⁴ Ian McFarland expresses it as follows:

"That this fulfilment of human life is accomplished by the power of the Spirit is fully consistent with Jesus' own human life, since it was just by the grace and power of the Spirit that Jesus lived the human life he did. But precisely because the Spirit of God by which Jesus did all this is the Spirit of Jesus (inasmuch as Jesus is God), it is not a force or power that operates apart from or independently of Jesus. Consequently, it is not separable from him so long as he dwells in time and space (Jn 7:39), and so can only be poured out in the world once Jesus himself is absent in body from the world (16:7). ... Thus the Spirit is in all cases the agent of the Word's embodiment, but in the present period, the Spirit effects this mystery...by enabling us to live...in the Word and to live forth the Word's own life."²⁴⁵

What these initial thoughts establish is the fact that, the reference to the triune God, is thereby not excluded in spite of the prominence that is given in this dissertation to the second Person in the Godhead, Christ, as the *image* of social transformation. Hence we can say, from a christological standpoint, the Holy Spirit is the *one* – not just an impulse, but the being (recall my critique of Sobrino's idea of the "spirit") – "who makes the risen Christ existentially present and active to Christians" in every time and place.²⁴⁶ There are other senses in which I shall fill out the idea here on the place and role of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of society.

The first sense offers a further description of the idea I have touched upon already. It has to do with the direct role of the Holy Spirit in the work of social transformation. The Holy Spirit is the power through which, or better still as the person with which, the risen Lord remains present in the history and situation of a people longing for the transformation

²⁴⁴ John Paul II, "The Holy Spirit: Lord and Giver of Life," in Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, "On Jesus Christ the Saviour and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: '...That They May Have Life, and Have it Abundantly' (Jn 10:10), *Ecclesia in Asia*," 6 November, 1999, *AAS* 92 (2000): no. 15.

²⁴⁵ Ian McFarland, "Jesus' Presence Now," in *The Word Made Flesh*, 208.

²⁴⁶ Cahill, "Spirit, Ethics and Empowerment," in *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics*, 166-167.

Christ brought and brings. In this fashion, the Spirit is acknowledged as one who re-enacts and furthers the ongoing transformative presence and act of Christ in history, in the world, and in societies. It is the Spirit which has been given or released into the lives of believers and the believing community, “the community that can be described (in the words of Williams) as Jesus’ spiritual progeny” that makes it possible for members of the community to take up Jesus’ role and his place.²⁴⁷ By the power of the Spirit, human beings are able to live in a mode – the attitude of freedom as children God – that transforms the society, reshapes its meaning, recreates its flow in and through Jesus Christ. By the working of the Spirit which has been poured out on all flesh (Jl 2:28; Ac 10:45; Rm 5:5) human beings are set free to enter into every space fashioning and transforming it in everything they do in the light of the resplendent “image” [Christ] that has risen and rises before them, uniquely and universally in every age. Cahill refers to Shawn Copeland as having made the point eloquently in these words:

“The gift of God’s loving Spirit creates a new basis for community. Women and men experience themselves as transformed persons who are called to live out this gift of love concretely through transformed human relations and who are knit together and empowered by the same Spirit to witness to a new reality.”²⁴⁸

In this way, it could be said eloquently that nothing determines the relation between Christology and social transformation, and gives the relation its dynamism, as the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the divine agency that makes the transforming presence and works of Christ alive and relieved.

Furthermore, the role of the Holy Spirit can be articulated in terms of the “disposition” which the Spirit also creates in people, in Christians and non-Christians alike, as they labour for the transformation of their society. Two of the dispositions are particularly important here: openness and humility. Jon Sobrino describes these two as the ultimate Christian dispositions when confronting the historical-theological realities.²⁴⁹ By the working of the Spirit, what happened – and still happens – in Jesus’ human earthly life can happen in the lives of those who today in Africa proclaim him as the image of societal transformation. The Spirit opens our minds and hearts, making us able to trust and to be humble like Jesus even as we work towards the utmost reign of God’s Kingdom. In this way, a social transformation-oriented Christology emphasizes the fact that God in Christ Jesus is the “author and finisher” (Heb 12:2) of the transformation we long for. He does not so much require something of us as want to give something to us. God’s desire has always been to give us Himself in his Son, and all that this self-giving entails, including, the transformation of a society in which each and every individual’s health, well-being and flourishing are easily realised. Thus, and as already stated, the grace of our relationship with Christ and others through the power of the Holy Spirit is the grounding and vivifying reality for Christian commitment to social transformation.

²⁴⁷ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 219.

²⁴⁸ Shawn Copeland, “Knit Together by the Spirit as Church,” in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women’s Strategies for Reform*, ed. Colleen M. Griffith (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2009), 19, and cited in Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics*, 165.

²⁴⁹ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 3.

Where Christ is discerned to be active, and his actions collaborated with, society itself is brought closer to what it is meant to be: a space of mutual human flourishing. This equally requires still that we remain open even in the face of undeniable realities of brokenness, injustice, and suffering experienced in our individual and collective lives. In this openness and trust, we begin to understand that the transformation of society can take many forms, which might not necessarily be materialistic. This is to say, remaining open to the workings of the Spirit, to how Christ continues to transform the social order, demands learning to appreciate that there are transformations that will happen within a society which materially or structurally may not change. But this is never to suggest, and far be it, another blind resignation to fate, or that Christians should put up with the evils (unbearable poverties, avoidable deaths from many curable illnesses, and systemic injustice) that could be addressed, the kind that move many of them to long for the transformation Christ wrought.²⁵⁰ It is rather an invitation to a renewed trust in the transforming presence and power of Christ, the “engine for transformation, for entering novel commitments, for transforming one’s way of being in the world in the recognition of how Jesus Christ himself is real and active in the world.”²⁵¹ In this sense, “the ultimate force of transformation is, thus, identified as the divine causality of love, not as a sentimental feeling, but as a powerful and dynamic presence, and also as a fundamental praxis of Jesus.”²⁵²

CONCLUSION

The themes I have expounded in this chapter are the historical (normative and concrete, theological and practical) correlates of the faith affirmation that Jesus Christ is the image of social transformation, that he is the source and bringer of healing, liberation and integral well-being to people and their society. I offered my argumentation for these points still in the light of the consistent threefold christological notions of relationship, agency and act. These, as the study has maintained from its beginning, are the christological conditions for societal transformation. In addition to these christological and praxeological insights, or rather in the light of them, I also embarked on a further reflection of their significance for deepening the meaning of Christology today, for reinforcing the social mission of the church, and for the possibility and legitimacy of making space for Christ-centred vision and ethic in the public square. Finally, the chapter highlighted the pneumatological dimension of believing in and thinking about Christ as the bringer of social transformation. It is in the light of all these perspectives held together, I suggested, that the transformative implications of christological belief and reflections are brought to light. In other words, these perspectives help in clarifying the actual content of a transformative Christology, and for determining also the line of the connection between faith in Jesus Christ and the shared longing for (realization of) a positive societal change in Africa.

²⁵⁰ Notably, Sobrino cautions against the abandonment of the world to its wretchedness. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 16.

²⁵¹ Davies, Janz, and Sedmak, *Transformation Theology*, 8.

²⁵² Ibid.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

1. Summary and Synthesis: Fruits of the Research Project

In this research, I investigated the relationship between belief in Jesus Christ and the quest for social transformation in the African context. The point of the investigation has been to delineate the socially transformative character and potential of the vibrantly imagined Christologies in African Christianity. I did this by examining three images of Christ – healer, liberator and king – in the grassroots Christian communities (Chapter 1) and in the works of six African theologians who represent three leading trends in contemporary African Christology (Chapter 2). Taking into account the narratives of meaning and actual operation of the christological images in terms of the longing for social change in Africa, I entered into dialogue with the historical Christology of Jon Sobrino (Chapter 3). In the final chapter, I laid out the theological-practical implications of the christological model of incarnate divinity for the commitment to societal transformation (Chapter 4). All these were done along the lines of the consistent threefold christological notions: (1) enhanced relationship of Christians with Christ and with other human beings, (2) empowered agency of African Christians, and (3) embodied practices of solidarity within and beyond the ecclesial-social context. It is based on these notions that I suggest we can speak more meaningfully *about* and *to* Jesus Christ as the image of social transformation in Africa, and perhaps elsewhere.

Thus I hope to have done the four things I had in mind at the beginning of the research: first, address the limits of the proclamation and reflections about Christ's identity and work as healer, liberator and king found in the African Christian churches and theological landscape; second, lay down more clearly the theological-practical connection between belief in Jesus Christ and the Christian commitment to the transformation of societies; third, disclose the radical potential of the vibrant christological beliefs and realign them with efforts to bring about a transformed society; and in so doing, fourth, pursue a social transformation-oriented Christology in and for the African context. Having said that, the following conclusions can be drawn, and, I hope, in a concise series of important theses.

Thesis 1: *The vibrant christological imagination present in the African Christian consciousness can – but does not yet – fully provide the resources for Christians' commitment to social transformation. This is because of how the vast majority of Christians, particularly at the grassroots level, understand and respond to the reality of Christ in relation to their challenging social situations.*

Christians like to think of Christ as the sole agent and bringer of societal transformation. As one who is fully human and fully divine, Jesus shares their griefs and anxieties, their joys and hope. In this light, he has the power to make all things well again in the societies in which they live, towards their well-being, life in freedom, and experience of social justice. So, they confess and invoke Christ in such images like healer, liberator and king. Obviously, Jesus is clearly identified in these images, in the Gospels (cf. Lk 4:40; Lk 4: 18-19; Jn 18:37). But the vibrancy of their proclamation in African Christianity is due to the

fact that the images are also informed by the challenging social realities of the vast majority of Africans, Christian and non-Christians alike. So, when Christians confess that Jesus is healer, liberator and king what they mean is that Jesus is the source and ground of social transformation.

Yet while this christological imagination of social transformation has a certain *prima facie* plausibility and possibility, it has serious limitations because of the way it is expressed, and due to the fact of its actual operation and functionality among Christians. The experiences and proclamation of Christ are often in terms of what Christ, by the might of his divine power as God, will do *for* the Christians who are sick, who suffer unbearable poverty, and are victims of oppressive leadership. This sort of christological absolutization and instrumentalization limits the socially transformative potential of confession of faith in Jesus Christ. For one, it has consequence for how Christians understand themselves, their faith, and how they engage and/or disengage in the social sphere by the virtue of this understanding. And so, there is the need for a continuous and more robust critical and constructive engagement with the grassroots Christologies, if they are to present the resources for social transformation. The resources, I argued, could be presented as in the way of rethinking Christians' self-understanding, their disposition, and their commitment in the social sphere. This need is what I have tried to attend to by suggesting new lines for articulating and understanding the images of Christ as resources for Christian social engagement. I believe that if we have a little more clarity of the images in the light of the three christological notions of relationship, agency and act we may have a more reinforced sense of Christian possibility and vocation, especially in the social sphere of today's Africa. This is to say the study of christological images in the various forms of devotions and expressions popular in African Christian and social context remains a very important area of any serious christological endeavour.

Thesis 2: *African theologians have tried to distil the socially transformative potential of christological images in Africa, but they have not sufficiently done so. This is due to their governing foundational presuppositions, – like their methodological, hermeneutical, and epistemological-theological frameworks, – and in turn, their christological proposals for determining the relation between belief in Christ and social transformation.*

There are many early and contemporary African scholars, south of the Sahara, who have produced a body of literature dealing with the subject of christological belief and its relation to social transformation in Africa. These scholars, in their different ways, have long been involved in the christological venture of speaking about Christ, in relation to the concrete issues of social deprivation and the much-needed transformation in the continent. In their concern for the social situations of many Africans, they have succeeded in forming christological judgments and formulating concrete proposals in response to them. But most of the judgements and proposals, as this study has demonstrated, tend to be an exercise in intellectuality and erudition. The outcome appears to be mainly about the general and socially exclusive (i.e., pertaining to women and church hierarchy) significance of the prophetic character of the christological images.

This gap, as I was able to trace, is largely due to the governing foundational presuppositions undergirding the theologians' christological reflections – like the methodological moves, the hermeneutical assumptions, and the epistemological frameworks – and consequently the outcome in accounting for and determining how belief in Christ leads to social transformation. Their reflections on the images of Christ in response to the issue of social transformation appear in such forms as mere christological adaptationism, transposition, and re-narration. These are often the reworking and translation of the cultural (Aylward Shorter and Ukachukwu Chris Manus), biblical (Jean Marc Éla and Mercy Amba Oduyoye), kerygmatic-ethical (Kä Mana), and doctrinal-notional (Victor Ezigbo) perspectives about Jesus' life and mission, and how they find application, predominantly in the pastoral activities of the Church hierarchy in Africa.

The approaches of these theologians, however good their respective attempts, conduce christological explorations that are still overly academic and presented in form of individualised Christologies, not only in their interpretations of Jesus' identity and work, but in the implications they draw therefrom, for the work of social transformation in Africa. In other words, their christological undertakings tend not to connect to ordinary believers, and how they can and must replicate in their own lives and societies, the transforming life and work of Jesus Christ. Hence, in my view, the trail of their christological explorations does not yet open up to a more critically enlivened, engaged, embodied, and collaborative commitment to transforming human society in Africa, or in a word, to a much-needed socially transformative Christology in Africa – a Christology that can re-orient and transform Christian practices of faith, human living, and the social order in the context.

Thesis 3: *The ecclesial-social context of Christianity in Africa demands a Christology with a robust belief in, and affirmation of, Christ's full and ongoing incarnation, and subsequently, a strong connection among Christ, Christians and social change.*

A Christology that will respond adequately to the social and ecclesial situation of Africa needs to be grounded in the most fundamental reality of the Christian belief, which is the reality of God who became human, and in this way united himself with entire humanity. This singular event of the Incarnation is at once both complete and ongoing. Hence it allows for the possibility of a more critical, and yet, confirming engagement of Christians' imagination of Christ's identity and work. This engagement is carried out in the light of specific narratives from the sources of Christian tradition. In these sources, the understanding of Christ – as the guarantor of personal and social transformation – unfolds within the framework of his relationship with the Father and other human beings, the empowerment of his agency as the outcome of this relationship, and the commitment to practices of transformation in terms of healing, liberation, and service. These understandings and affirmation about Christ's identity and mission are important for forming Christians, and for inspiring coherent practices that could bring about positive changes in African society.

Thesis 4: *Jon Sobrino's historical Christology, with its model of Christ's existence as incarnate divinity, offers an essential prism for entering into fuller and more critical dialogue with the grassroots and academic African Christologies. It offers a theological-practical structure, or what can be called the historical correlates, which allow one to lay out more systematically the relation between faith in Jesus Christ and the transformation of society, and its implications for the pursuit of an authentically social transformation-oriented Christology.*

In order to address the limitations in the grassroots and academic African Christologies, I entered into critical dialogue with Jon Sobrino's saving-history Christology. Sobrino's Christology is presented as a discourse about societal transformation: the fundamental transformation of the individual Christian and his or her community in relation to Christ. Also, in his Christology, faith in Jesus Christ is interpreted as the testimony of Christ's transforming presence and action in society. And the goal is the bringing of healing, liberation and the reign of God's kingdom to lives and in places in which the human agents have inflicted and have continued to perpetrate poverty, suffering and all forms of injustice.

In the course of the critical engagement with Jon Sobrino's historical Christology, the model of Christ's existence as "incarnate divinity" was retrieved. Sobrino uses the model to work out how Christ is literally and personally present and acting within (i.e., transforming) our societies. According to Sobrino, Christ does so particularly in the inseparable way of his being the Son of God and Son of Man. This way of being, on the one hand, consists directly in (1) Jesus' intimate relationship with the Father and with other human beings, (2) the empowerment of his own agency, and (3) his acting-out of the relationship and exercise of the agency in serving the good of other people. On the other hand, it consists in the 'analogue of relatedness' to, and communication with, Christians. The Christians themselves are called in and with Christ to transform their societies by means of their living relationship with Christ and with others, their own empowered agency as the outflow of this relationship, and (3) the embodied practices of solidarity within and beyond ecclesial context.¹

Thesis 5: *The christological and, subsequently, praxeological perspectives shed clearer light on the relation between belief in Jesus Christ and social transformation in terms of three effects of this belief: (1) an enhanced relationship with Christ and with others; (2) an engaged or empowered agency of African Christians by the grace of the relationship; and (3) embodied practices of solidarity, particularly within the domains of the routine life, for example, the family and basic ecclesial-social communities. These perspectives therefore present resources for actualizing the socially transformative potential of christological beliefs. They also help in the pursuit of a socially transformative Christology within the context of Africa.*

¹ Similar reasoning and understanding, to which I am also indebted, could be seen in the concluding reflections by Rowan Williams in *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 221, 242.

The profession of faith in Christ as true God and true man, a single reality of God's self-revelation regardless of the image in which he is proclaimed, is characterized by three elements: living relationship with Christ and with others, empowered agency as the generative consequence of the relationship, and embodied practices of solidarity as the creative outflow of the enhanced relationship and engaged agency. The transformation of society is viewed, and in the light of these christological dynamics, as the visible or existential manifestation of the transforming experience of the Christian with Christ and with other human beings. So, as we think about the transformation of society in Africa christologically, we also see the possibility of understanding it more fully.

These views have further implications for the meaning and practice of Christology in Africa. Firstly, as the study shows, these christological resources allow us to re-imagine Christology itself as the discipline, a theological engagement, that traces how Christ transforms and is transforming the social order in Africa. The second point follows from the first. The ideas, and in the light of my christological move in the dissertation – that begins its search for a transformative Christology from within the believing community at the grassroots – helps in repositioning Christology and its practice within the church. This bears a consequence for reinforcing and broadening the mission of the church that privileges the commitment to social transformation. Thirdly, along the same line of thinking, the christological ideas allow for the inclusion of a christocentric vision and ethics in the public sphere.

Thesis 6: *The Christ-event and the event of transforming human society are not isolated events.*

The Christ-event, which is the object of every Christology, is a transforming event at every level, both personal and social. God had determined that the redemption of humanity was to come through a human being – to the fact that Jesus became like us “in every respect” (Heb 2:7). This fundamental Christian claim would mean that the event of Christ's life, mission, death and resurrection, or simply put, the Christ-event, is not only the revelation of God, but also the ‘revelation’ of humankind. As such, no aspect of our human existence is excluded from Jesus' life.² For “he had to become like us in every respect in order that every dimension of human life and living might be *transformed* by him.”³ This is not to imply that we're only interested in Christ because we want to transform society. It is not also to suggest that the main goal of the Christ-event is the transformation of society. This would become another kind of instrumentalization of Christ, as if his life, suffering and death were just simply to bring about nothing but social transformation in Africa.

Rather, in upholding the view that the Christ-event is connected to the event of social transformation is to speak of the interpenetration of christological and social imagination, how the two imaginations are tangled up with one another. Where belief in the Christ-event should open up to commitment to the transformation of society, which is the space for actualizing the ongoing effect of the Christ-event. That is to say, the transformation of

² Ian A. McFarland, “Introduction: A Chalcedonianism without Reserve,” in *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation*, 2.

³ *Ibid.* Italics mine.

society for the well-being of every human individual is the event of Jesus Christ, who himself continues to eternally act for the healing, liberation and well-being of people. Labouring for the transformation of society means acknowledging and promoting the action of Christ, which is present in social situations, and is transforming them for good. As such, a transformed society that promotes the healing, liberation and well-being of every human person in it, is the realization and the manifestation of Christ's loving will that people "may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). This consideration is necessary to avoid one-sided accentuations as is the case with those perspectives that tend to emphasize one over another, or even pit the two against each other.

Following this train of reasoning, one could maintain that personal and social transformation are integral to a transformative Christology. That is why my critical engagement of the grassroots African Christians' commemoration of the Christ-event, and the theologians' reflections on its meaning for the life of people and society, led me towards a fresh way of thinking about the meaning of Christology itself, and the possibility of re-envisioning its practice in Africa. Of the first, namely, the meaning, Christology becomes the discipline or the art of tracing, participating in, and collaborating with how Christ transforms the social order by means of a living relationship with him, empowered agency, and embodied practices of solidarity. Of the second, that is, concerning the practice of Christology, what Sobrino says of the practice of "theology in a suffering world," can also cast searching light on the practice of Christology.⁴ In Sobrino's reflections, in so far as the salvation won by Christ stands at the heart of Christian faith, Christology which is an intellectual mediation of this faith, "must confront suffering, determine the fundamental form of suffering, and ask what can be done about it."⁵ One cannot claim to be practicing Christology (the belief in and thinking about Christ, or the speech to and about Christ) if one closes his or her eyes to the suffering that pervades our world.⁶ To do so will tantamount to dissociating Christology "from the real historical humanity in which we all live, and which theologically, is God's own creation."⁷ And this creation is the place of his transforming presence and act.

Sobrino's illuminating words about the practice of Christology show, in the last resort, that the doctrine of Christ can only be practiced. It can only be lived. It is in and as lived, that proclaiming and reflecting about Jesus today becomes a transformative resource. Thus, we are always brought to ask the critical question: what does our Christology lead us to do or leave undone? What have we done and have left undone in the struggle against massive and despicable injustice found everywhere in our world? The mention of "what has been left undone" as regards the loving response to our suffering world lead me to point out some of the things I have also 'left undone' in the present dissertation – some grounds that I have not been able to cover, which are also spaces for ongoing (re-)search.

⁴ See Sobrino, "Theology in a Suffering World: Theology as *Intellectus Amoris*," in *The Principle of Mercy*, 27-46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30. For a similar line of thinking see also Christopher Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁷ Sobrino, "Theology in a Suffering World: Theology as *Intellectus Amoris*," in *The Principle of Mercy*, 30.

2. Limitations and Future Directions of the Research

This research project has been carried out with a clear research question and hypothesis, which were meant to focus the exploration of a complex subject matter, namely, the relationship between christological belief and social transformation in Africa. The complexity owes to the fact that there has not been any extensive, sustained, critical, and systematic-theological treatment of the subject by African theologians. Moreover, our starting point – that of grassroots Christologies – for the investigation is often a road less travelled by academic theologians; maybe, for the reason of the fluidity and manifold character of the experience of faith at that level. But we should not be afraid of that which, by my light, makes Christology an exhilarating enterprise. There is another point of the complexity. It stems from the fact that the main theological interlocutor in the work is from another context, and his christological reflections were mainly developed within and for the Latin American context. I hope I have sufficiently justified my choice of him and his Christology in the third chapter of this dissertation.

Nonetheless, these pointers make our current research a very challenging one, but a promising one at that. This meant that in the course of the project, certain avenues which had opened up were not able to be explored in fine detail. That is a limitation in itself. In this section, we underline some of these limitations, which at the same time help us to delineate the potential avenues for further research. This is to say that the weak points of the research present the ideas for further research. This is the paradox of grace even in a work like this. After all, did the preacher to the nations not say that “strength is revealed and made perfect in weakness” (1 Cor 12:9)?

In the first chapter on the grassroots Christologies, there is no sustained critical attention to indigenous knowledge, or cultural analysis in my exposition and critique of the narratives of meaning and function of Christ’s identity and work at that level. It is a fact that in scholarly circles it seems agreed that a thorough cultural hermeneutics of christological images employed both in the Christian practices and in the theologies of Christ in African Christianity is vitally necessary. Scholars like Lawrence Nwankwo, Stan Chu Ilo and Peter Henriot have argued and sufficiently demonstrated that cultural, traditional, or indigenous analytical process could lead to a deeper understanding of the faith responses and attitudes of the African Christians, particularly in the face of the social realities that give rise to certain christological images.⁸ The analysis is also important for a more effective mobilization of the human agency of Christians for the commitment to societal transformation.⁹

But this limitation is justifiable. Its justification is based on the fact that such cultural analysis can be adequately done from within the particular context of the cultural

⁸ Nwankwo, “African Christianity and the Challenge of Prosperity Gospel,” 11-27. Ilo, “Beginning Afresh with Christ in the Search for Abundant Life in Africa,” 1-34; Henriot, “Grassroots Analysis: The Emphasis on Culture,” 333-350. One of the earlier and finest works on this subject is by Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture on Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992). See also Bediako, “Jesus in African Culture—A Ghanaian Perspective,” in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*, 20-33.

⁹ See Lawrence Nwankwo, “You have received the Spirit of Power...” (2 Tim. 1:7): Reviewing the Prosperity Message in the Light of a Theology of Empowerment,” 56-77.

experience and the various modes of its expression. The analysis can be done more adequately from the participative observation of, and by way of personal insertion into, the lived reality of Africans. This can help avoid an all too abstract model or concept being employed in approaching the complex issue of how to bring into reality the personal and social relationships that Christians proclaim in the name of the *incarnate* Christ. This already points to two areas for future research. The first is about the use and role of socio-cultural methodology in the systematic-theological investigation of the African Christian understanding of the meaning, and particularly, social relevance of faith in Jesus Christ. The second is related to or follows from the first. It is an investigation of the social and cultural structures and realities which are still in place, and that influence how African Christians relate to the person of Christ, and in turn, how they organize their societies in the light of this relation.

With regard to my presentation of the belief of ordinary Christians in Africa, which I insist ought to be taken seriously, I have not given sustained attention to the reality and question of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and social transformation. This is notably a major field in and of itself that is worth investigating given the place, continued rise and influence of Pentecostalism in African Christianity.¹⁰

Another limit that is at once an avenue for further research is on the main proposal of relating Christ to social realities and consequently, of social transformation, in which the impression is made that the confession and the doctrine of Christ does entail social well-being. There is no problem with this basic insight but with the methodological move I make in the effort to advance this argument. There are two related inherent limits of such move. First, the view that faith in Christ and reflection on it, for what it is properly, would allow for and lead to the transformation of societies does not sufficiently take into account the fact of the intrinsic sinfulness and brokenness of the human person, and that human beings cannot be like Christ as such in the manner of his own relation to the Godhead, in the exercise of his own agency, and in the way of his total self-giving for the life of the world. This explains why we need to rediscover in the very noisy world of today, the centrality of meditation, contemplation, silence, and solitude, as means of entering into and participating more fully in the divine life (and every human being bears this seed of divine life) and in turn, social life.

Second, the view suggests a one-sided movement from Christ and christological belief to the social structures without any account of the dynamics of the structures of social arrangement that any such critically appropriated christological belief would have to engage. These are very serious limitations at that. The road to making up for them, particularly the second limit, can be long and arduous. I am not well-equipped to embark on such an effort all by myself. Hence, to make up for it I have proposed in my annexed thesis that: A transformative Christology should include developments in social theory as source for understanding the meaning and implications of Christ for life in society. Even when that is said and taken into account in the ongoing work of relating Christ to social

¹⁰ Some of the recent works on the subject include: Wanjiru M. Gitau, *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in Africa* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018); Kyama M. Mugambi, *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020).

transformation, it must be kept in mind that Christology ought to remain true to its task, to its own proper themes: Christ and the Christ-event. It is in doing justice to the themes, though in the light of social and human needs (an idea by Kasper), that the theologian responds meaningfully and adequately to the challenges of social transformation in every age. But even at that, what can be more social and sometimes even “political” than the christological focus on the Christians’ relationship with Christ and with their fellow human beings, its outward movement of empowered agency for participation in the social sphere, and its practical outworking for societal transformation.

3. Concluding Remarks

As I have been granted to see it, the question of Christ as the image of and for societal transformation is a critical question that theologians and Christians need to keep alive, especially in our world of today. A world in which there has been an endless talk about, and search for, ways of re-imagining societies for the well-being of all, especially for the poor and the vulnerable. It seems we have reached a deadlock in the conversation and in our search. And this is a cause of so much burden. A burden that moved me to embark on this project in the first place, and which sustained me throughout the course of the project up to its successful completion. I am not so sure if I have also succeeded in doing justice to the question of how Christ *is* the image of social transformation in Africa and elsewhere. To claim to have done that will risk making this project one of such, sometimes, futile speculations about the identity and work of Christ. However, something, arguably, more sublime seems to have occurred in the course of the project. What is that?

It happens that as I come to the end of writing this dissertation, the burden which inspired me to undertake the research in the first place has not only endured, but has become intensified. This is so, as I hear each passing day the cries of so much unbearable sufferings in my motherland as elsewhere in the world. I think of many individuals and communities whose experiences of vicious inequalities have increased due to the outbreak of the recent coronavirus disease; the festering hostilities to many women and children in the Middle East; the countless innocents that continue to be exposed to unimaginable risk in the Mediterranean sea; many alienated, lonely young and elderly people in Europe; so many families that are stifled under the weight of the finance-dominated capitalism of North America. The list is long; and it can go on. We are implicated in it all, in ways that are both palpable and subtle.

So, what then is sublime about these painful human, social realities? It is the fact that in hearing and thinking about these realities of people like me, the real experiences of my fellow human beings, with whom I have been granted to inhabit the social landscape, which we are called in and with Christ to transform for the well-being of all, I am made to turn back to Christ. I turn back to him not simply as an object to be discussed or explained. I turn back to him as *the* one whom I believe can and does continue to transform the lives, situations and burdens of those who confess and hope in him as the *image* of social transformation.

With a share of this burden in my mind, heart and body, I am resolved to devote myself wholly to the work of personal and social change “through him, and with him, and in him.” And to do so with total trust in Christ, for he is “able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or *imagine*, according to his power that is at work within us” (Eph 3:20).

APPENDIX: CONCLUDING POSTSCRIPT

OBIEFUNA, NYIRUMBE, TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES, AND AN IMAGE OF A TRANSFORMED AFRICAN SOCIETY

In this Appendix, I want to offer a few brief reflections on some individual Christians, on the example of grassroots Christian communities, and how these individuals and communities have transformed and are transforming the social context in which they are located. I will also share some thoughts on what an image of a transformed African society might look like, or rather, the character of social agents and their relations, which in turn lead to a transformed society. The purpose for offering these reflections here is twofold. The first is to illuminate how the agency of an individual Christian and/or community of believers can be so empowered by faith in (relationship with) Jesus Christ, and thus, become oriented towards being-for-others and enacting practices that bring about the transformation of human lives and their society. In doing so, I seek to point to individuals and communities that stand out as models of social spirituality, social charity and justice for all people of good will. The second purpose, regarding the description of a transformed African society, is to point to the fact that the image of a transformed Africa is no Utopia, but a reality, which Africans, Christians and non-Christians alike, advance to bring about in hope. The hope is that a transformed African society that works for the good and flourishing of all is possible. This is the confidence that carries the Christian, and still makes it worthwhile even today to keep imagining, longing, and very importantly, labouring for its realization, for each and every member of the African society. I hope this may throw some more light on the discussion followed in this dissertation, and where and how a transformative Christology has been, is still, and can be practiced in Africa and elsewhere.

1.

Contemplative Christology of Albert Obiefuna: Ground of His Pastoral Imagination for Societal Transformation

In chapter 4, I offered a discussion of places where relationship with Christ and other human beings can be enhanced. In my presentation of the practice of contemplation as one of the places, I referred to Kanenechukwu Albert Obiefuna as a contemplative exemplar. Albert Obiefuna was a renowned Nigerian Roman Catholic Archbishop, who is remembered for initiating and promoting the practice of contemplation as far as its formal history in the context is concerned.¹ He was born on January 30, 1930. He trained for the priesthood and was ordained in 1963. In 1977, he became a bishop, the first bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Awka, to which I belong. He was raised to the rank of Archbishop in 1994, and so was transferred to the Metropolitan See of Onitsha. There he was the Archbishop of Onitsha

¹ Christian Amogu, "Archbishop A. K. Obiefuna – Apostle of Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration," in *Stuff of a Saint: Archbishop A.K. Obiefuna*, ed. Blaise Emebo (Owerri: Living Flames Resources, 2011), 57-69.

Archdiocese and Metropolitan of Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province from 1995 till his retirement in 2003. He died in 2011.

Albert Obiefuna's graceful life and transforming ministry gave credence to the depth of his contemplative spirit. Archbishop Obiefuna believed that the Christian life and everything about its existence, sustenance and fruitfulness has something to do with the exercise of contemplation. He also believed that there is a profound relationship among the inner transformation wrought by contemplation, the formation of social consciousness, and the transformation of social structures. Obiefuna stresses that not only Christian spirituality, but the reflection about Jesus Christ, ought to be approached in an attitude of contemplative love. This entails letting the object of one's contemplation to direct the gaze of the mind, of the heart, and even of the body.

According to Obiefuna, contemplation is the exercise of silence, solitude, attentiveness, patient waiting, and wordless prayer in the Eucharistic Presence. This practice was for him the ground of an individual's and believing community's living relationship with Jesus Christ, which in turn has an impact on the Christian commitment to building a more just and humane society.² The contemplative exercise, however, does not demand quick answers nor offer impulsive responses to challenging issues of faith and life in both ecclesial and social situations. The exercise is also not a question of individualistic or private discoveries, but rather the experience of a transforming vision and energy given in *being present*, in *staying there*, to be transformed so as to become, like the Good Samaritan, (moving) agents of transformation in every event of encounter with other people, and within the society at large.

Obiefuna applied it also to the liturgy of the Church. Good liturgy as an encounter with Christ and his people is about contemplation – contemplating the reality in which one is participating and the realities of those who are participating. Hence his christological spirituality of *staying* in His Real Presence is different from the noisy frenzy it has been turned to in the Nigerian liturgical context. Many of our liturgies have become a space where so many things happen with lots of ceremonial, cluttered talk and activities of all kinds. There's little or no *space* for silence, for waiting, for gazing, for being attentive, and for allowing ourselves to be encountered by Christ, the supposed subject of all our liturgical gatherings. Could this explain why there are so many liturgical activities going on in our churches and still little transformative effect in our individual and social lives and existence? Perhaps the absence of the contemplative dynamic minimizes the transforming effect of our many Eucharistic celebrations. Obiefuna makes similar observation in one of his pastoral letters on liturgical celebrations.³

Obiefuna's entire life, priestly ministry and ecclesial leadership were grounded in the exercise of contemplation. His relationship with Christ and with other people, particularly the flock of Christ entrusted to his care, were sustained in his personal encounter with God in the Eucharistic Presence. The saintly Archbishop realised that no one but Christ alone

² See also Bénézet Bujo, "Christological and Eucharistic Foundations of an African Ecclesiology," 92-96 and "The Challenge of a Christological-Eucharistic Ecclesiology," 96-114 in *African Theology in Its Social Context*.

³ Albert Obiefuna, Pastoral Letter, "Sunday is Our Weekly Easter: An Explanation of the Meaning of the Christian Sunday and Its Observance," (Onitsha: Tabansi Press Ltd., 1979).

rightly directs the actions performed in his name for the transformation of lives and society.⁴ Obiefuna considered the *askesis* (discipline) of contemplative prayer a fundamental priority in the work of pastoral and social engagement, or, as he expresses, in the Church's involvement in "social action for the development of...people."⁵ Whoever does not come to know the face of Christ in contemplation, he often says, will not be able to recognise this face in the encounter with others, especially those who are poor, vulnerable, and hungering for justice.⁶ Hence he let his entire pastoral solicitude, which had a uniquely social resonance and relevance, flow from his contemplative encounter. For this reason, he never ceased pointing to the fact that contemplative practice has the potential to open Christians up to greater love, thoughtful empathy, and embodied actions that are fostered through being in a silent gaze, and, thence, surrendering to Christ.⁷ He considers this as a unique space for personal formation and transformation that makes the Christian commitment to social transformation an embodied act.⁸

2.

Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe: Healing and Restoring the Wounded, Transforming Lives and Society in Africa.

Another personage I have chosen in order to illumine the experience of the transforming relationship with Christ and with other human beings is Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe. Sr. Nyirumbe is an excellent icon of a transformative Christology. She is a stand-in for all of us who seek to collaborate with Christ's solidarity with a wounded people. This kind of collaboration, she exemplifies, flows from an intimate and loving relationship with Christ. In her utterly generous gift of self to Christ on behalf of the victims of abuse and violence in Uganda and southern Sudan (now South Sudan), Sister Nyirumbe seems to be the paragon of transformed and transforming personality.⁹ She remains an outstanding example of one whose life, having been transformed by her relationship with Christ, is transforming other lives by her ministry of healing, reconciliation and restoration, in ways that have a profoundly socially transformative impact.

Rosemary Nyirumbe, the youngest child of Martino Orwodhi and Sabina Oti, was born in 1956, in the small hometown of Paidha, Uganda. Interestingly, Rosemary's last name *Nyirumbe* translates to "girls (*nyir*) are not there (*umbe*)."¹⁰ So she already embodied,

⁴ Blaise Emebo "Introduction," in *Stuff of a Saint*, vi-xii.

⁵ Albert Obiefuna, Pastoral Letter, "Give Them Something to Eat Yourselves," (Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick Ltd., 1992), 1.

⁶ Obiefuna, "The Church Today and the Hungry," in *Give Them Something to Eat Yourselves*, 7-11.

⁷ Idem, "Christ Continues to Work in His Church," in *Give Them Something to Eat Yourselves*, 4-7.

⁸ This was the subject of Albert Obiefuna's doctoral dissertation entitled "The Christian Education of Igbo Moral Conscience" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Accademia Pontificia Alfonsiana, Rome, 1966).

⁹ See Reggie Whitten and Nancy Henderson, *Sewing Hope: Joseph Kony tore those girls' lives apart. Can she stitch them back together?* (Oklahoma City, OK: Dust Jacket Press, 2013). This work is dedicated to Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe who in it is described as one who brings hope and healing to a violent world. See also María Ruiz Scaperlanda, *Rosemary Nyirumbe: Sewing Hope in Uganda* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Whitten and Henderson, *Sewing Hope*, 7.

quite early on in her life and name, the vocation of transforming the lives of girls who would be victims of a society that demeaned them. The seed of this vocation was also sown by Rosemary's father for whom equal access to education was a priority.

I encountered Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe for the first time during her visit to Leuven in 2018. She had been nominated for an honorary doctorate by KU Leuven at the time.¹¹ I had the opportunity of organizing an evening of interaction with Sister Nyirumbe. During the event, she offered a personal account of her life and ministry as the overflow of her living personal relationship with Christ. She kept referring to her profound loving relationship with Christ as the ground of the work that she and her sisters undertake in the healing and restoration of women and girls in Uganda. This transforming relationship is the unction for Sister Rosemary's vocation of healing presence and action in the midst of societal degeneration.

In the introduction to *Sewing Hope*, Authors Reggie Whitten and Nancy Henderson also tell of some of the pivotal events of Sister Nyirumbe's life, and her experience of hope for transforming the lives and the realities of girls, who were victims of unimaginable suffering:

“Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe suffered persistent pains in her thumbs which was caused by stenosing tenosynovitis, or trigger thumb, an inflammatory condition generally caused by overuse. She needed surgery, but here in Gulu, she had virtually no access to medical treatment. Living with pain was nothing new for Sister Rosemary and her girls. There was no doctor for the sick, no medicine for the weak and no place to go for help. They were truly on their own, and had been for decades.

Sewing pop tab purses each day made the pain almost unbearable. But sew she did, until her hands bled. Then she sewed some more, until the aluminium tabs, cloth lining and stitches were one. What was once rubble was now a beautiful purse, a unique, functional work of art and a source of pride for the students who learned to make them under the caring tutelage of a Catholic nun who loved the girls as if they were her own.

She had seen many things, some wonderful and many terrible, but she and the young ladies at her school were now bound together, not with thread, but with a pure and selfless love. She had lived in grave danger, surviving the violent dictatorship of former Ugandan president Idi Amin and the senseless war led by terrorist Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army. She had seen enough evil for many lifetimes and knew she was fortunate to have not been killed by the LRA thugs she had encountered over the years.”¹²

Through all these, she rose to become a social and moral exemplar of Christ's transforming power and act amongst people and within the communities in Uganda where she is based. This is so because she has handed herself over to the transforming love of Christ. Like the good Samaritan (the discourse in section 4.3 of chapter 4) Sister Nyirumbe

¹¹ See Tine Danschutter, “Patron Saint's Day 2018: KU Leuven to Award Four Honorary Doctorates,” trans. Katrien Bollen <https://nieuws.kuleuven.be/en/content/2017/psd2018-kuleuven-to-award-four-honorary-doctorates> [accessed January 20, 2020]. See also Ine Van Houdenhove, “Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe Brings Hope to Former Child Soldiers,” trans. Katrien Bollen <https://nieuws.kuleuven.be/en/content/2018/rosemary-nyirumbe> [accessed January 20, 2020].

¹² Whitten and Henderson, *Sewing Hope*, ii-iii.

engages in ministering Christ's healing to the victims of violence. In doing so, she contributes immensely to the transformation of lives and society in Uganda and beyond.

Sister Nyirumbe is constantly renewed in hope, in the hope that Christ brings about transformed lives and society; and that he does this through the hope we are always capable of 'sewing' in others' lives. As she testifies in the epilogue to *Sewing Hope*:

"My hope is that St. Monica's will continue to expand and become an even better place after I'm gone. We have many more women and children to serve. The faster we move, the better. There is no time to waste...The older I get, the more my dreams grow, my hope is strengthened, and the clearer my visions get. I have learned that if you keep your dreams to yourself, they won't work. If you share them with other people, good things happen. If you dream big things, big things happen. I will never stop dreaming big...And the blessings will no doubt continue to flow...towards the transformation of lives and societies in Africa."¹³

3.

Transforming Communities

Our christological investigation pays a sympathetic, critical attention to how Christ's transforming power is experienced and expressed, particularly at the grassroots level. The investigation points unavoidably to the place and role of Christian communities in the social sphere. I wish here to describe the nature and to refer to examples of basic Christian communities that are spaces of Christ's transforming presence and act. In doing so, I highlight the need for the formation of smaller communities of basic shared human and social values that are rooted in the life of Christ.

My purpose in doing so is to point to a "new way of being Church in Africa that will entrench in the Christian community the awareness that the church does not exist for herself."¹⁴ That the Church is itself both a transformed and a transforming community. It should bear witness to the risen Lord in the world, and should proclaim the truth about Christ in such a way that leads to "social transformation, human development, and human promotion" on the continent.¹⁵ This insight also draws from the metaphor of the church as a "field hospital."¹⁶ Pope Francis had used this metaphor to describe the kind of church he dreams of. The Pope explains that the church he would like to see is the church that has "the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful."¹⁷ Francis goes on: "I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal wounds. Then we

¹³ Whitten and Henderson, *Sewing Hope*, 225-226,

¹⁴ See Elochukwu Uzukwu, "African Ecclesiology and Social Transformation," in *A Listening Church*, 8. See also Orobator, "Concluding Reflections," in *From Crisis to Kairos: The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty*, 252.

¹⁵ Orobator, "Concluding Reflections," 252.

¹⁶ See Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis," *America: The Jesuit Review*, September 30, 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview> [accessed 15 March, 2020]. See also William T. Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016).

¹⁷ Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God."

can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. And you have to start from the ground up.”¹⁸

The metaphor introduces a new imagination about the church. The image of the field hospital repositions the church as primarily a community of healing and restoration, a “body” of people dedicated to the mission of transforming lives and society. It is not just about individual Christians taking on heroic acts, as the Pope says in his explanation of the image. This idea again has been well observed by William Cavanaugh, who expresses it as follows:

“The church is not a collection of individuals, not even just an organization, but an organism. The church is in fact not an “it” but a “we,” a living subject, united to Christ our head, a body of people that brings many individual persons together, binding wounds precisely in binding people to one another in mutual care and love. For the same reason, the church is not the hierarchy but all of us. And the church attempts to heal all those looking for healing, Christian or not.” The church is not just a hospital but a *field* hospital. Unlike a stationary institution that occupies a certain territory and defends it against encroachment, a field hospital is mobile, an event more than an institution. A field hospital is unconcerned about defending its own prerogatives, and instead goes outside of itself to respond to an emergency. As a body it is visible, but it does not claim its own territory; its event-like character creates spaces for healing.”¹⁹

These insights help us in appreciating the *nature* of the church as basically a community of Christ’s transforming presence and act. They also point to the fact that one of the challenges in the church’s fulfilment of its social mission is the re-imagination of its existence as small communities for human flourishing. Models of such communities and their socially transformative potentials and commitments have been described in the works of William Cavanaugh,²⁰ Peter Henriot²¹ and Christine Bodewes.²²

4.

An Image of a Transformed African Society

The insights generated from our pursuit of a transformative Christology – that is, christological beliefs and reflections that are inspired and developed, respectively, with a constant concern for the transformation of society – might lead one to ask the question: what does a transformed society look like? Were African Christians and theologians to take seriously the christological pointers – relationship, agency, and act – that I have tried to present in this dissertation, what sort of society then would emerge in Africa? When I speak of Christ as the image of social transformation or a transformed society it must be

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Cavanaugh, *Field Hospital*, 3. Emphasis in the original.

²⁰ Cavanaugh, “Westphalia and Back: Complexifying the Church-World Duality,” in *Filed Hospital*, 32-54.

²¹ See, for example, the collection of fine essays on this subject in Frans Wijzen, Peter Henriot and Rodrigo Mejía, eds., *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005).

²² See Christine Bodewes, *Parish Transformation in Urban Slums: Voices of Kibera, Kenya* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005); idem, “Can the Pastoral Circle Transform a Parish?,” in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, 77-93.

understood that I am using it in two senses. It is in the understanding of Christ as the *reality* and the *way* which the whole creation, or what Rowan Williams designates as “the entire creaturely landscape,” of which Africa is but one of such, ought to image. In the light of this understanding, a transformed (African) society will be one that images the personality of Christ in the light of his loving relationship to the Father, the exercise of his own empowered human agency as a result of his oneness with the Father, manifest in his actions for the good of others (see Jn 14:10-11).

Also, the prophecy of Isaiah can set us somewhat straight here. We can read a passage in Isaiah as speaking of a transformed society, or as pointing to the “habits” of the people of a transformed society.

“The wolf will live with the lamb
 the panther lies down with the kid,
 calf, lion and fat-stock beast together,
 with a little boy to lead them.
 The cow and the bear will graze,
 their young will lie down together.
 The lion will eat hay like the ox.
 The infant will play over the den of the adder;
 the baby will put his hand into the viper’s lair.
 No hurt, no harm will be done on all my holy mountain,
 for the country will be full of knowledge of Yahweh
 as the waters cover the sea.”²³

The passage offers a dramatic vision of a transformed society. Such a society is one in which “the pillars of social development,” to borrow the phrase of Pope Francis, are present and enjoyed by the members: “increased security, reducing poverty, improving healthcare systems, favouring development and humanitarian assistance, promoting good governance and civil rights.”²⁴ These could be readily present, the prophecy suggests, when “the nation is full of the knowledge of the Lord,” when human beings open up to one another and to that Other who is the source and ground of the life Christians and non-Christians alike are longing for. So an image of a transformed society is the illustrious consequence of the economy of divine knowledge understood as living and loving *relationship* with God and with one another.

One need not read this as mere illusion or fantasy. It is no utopia understood wrongly as a flight of imagination. Rather the passage invites us to a practice of imaginative creativeness that is needed for Christian involvement in the works that can bring about the a more just social order. Brazilian Franciscan theologian, Leonardo Boff, in his book *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*, offers a brilliant defense of a utopian

²³ Is 11:6-9 (NJB).

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings*, Thursday, 9 January 2020. www.vatican.va [accessed January 12, 2020]. The Pope uses the phrase and mentions these elements when speaking of the longing of many Africans which he felt during his visits to some African countries.

element in any Christology that seeks to respond adequately to the issues of societal flourishing.²⁵ Here is Boff:

“Utopia ought not to be understood as a synonym for illusion and flight from present reality. As recent studies in philosophy and theology have revealed, utopia is born in springs of *hope*. It is responsible for models that seek a perfecting of our reality, models that do not allow the social process to stagnate, or society ideologically to absolutize itself, models that maintain society permanently open to ever increasing transformation. Faith promises and demonstrates, as realized in Christ, a utopia that consists in a world totally reconciled, a world that is the fulfilment of what we are creating here on earth with feeling and love. Our work in the construction of a more fraternal and humanized world...builds and slowly anticipates the definitive world, promised and demonstrated as possible by Jesus Christ.”²⁶

To speak of utopia, particularly in the way Boff does in the passage cited, is to speak of hope. There is no doubt that Africa remains a suffering continent, whose transformation has continued to be jeopardized by a conspiracy of internal and external forces. In the face of such a situation of things in the continent, hope remains the most important component of the imagination of a transformed African society. In other words, Africans remain in dire need of hope. This hope is not to be understood just as a gift for long-suffering; nor a reward for having reached the end of a dark socio-historical situation in Africa. Rather, this hope is an imaginative task, a commitment to Christ, the all-powerful and merciful agent, who continues to act within the unfolding history and social situation of the African continent.

The *Allegory of Good Government* depicted in the fresco by Ambrogio Lorenzetti helps us to grasp the dynamic form of, or even better, the direction of the *hope*-filled commitment that is directed towards a transformed (African) society. The fresco used on the “Cover” of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is described in terms that reflect something of the practical meaning and appropriation of the above prophecy.²⁷ The descriptions round off appropriately in quite dramatic terms, the christological discourse in this dissertation. The imageries, though lengthy, need to be quoted in full:

“The allegory begins with the biblical figure of Wisdom represented...as a crowned woman holding a large scale. Two figures are perfectly balanced on the plates of the scale, one representing distributive justice and the other communicative justice. Between these two figures is a large image of Justice personified. Above this personification is the inscription: “*Diligete justitiam qui judicatis terram*” (“Chose justice, you who govern the earth”), the opening verse of the Book of Wisdom, placed as a word of caution to the City Council that used to meet in room of the Palazzo

²⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 43-48.

²⁶ Boff, “The Primacy of the Utopian Element Over the Factual,” in *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 44-45. Emphasis mine. The idea of hope is a core christological motif and is central in the understanding of utopia in liberation theologies or other theologies that serve to provide a response to social issues. See, for example, Jon Sobrino, “Utopia,” in *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*, 80-88; Sobrino reminds us that utopia is that which “establishes the content of humanness: that which human beings must reach for and by which all progress will be judged human or inhuman...and establishes the hope that humanness is possible.” See Sobrino, *Where is God?*, 120.

²⁷ See Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004).

Pubblico. Beneath the figure of Justice there is another feminine figure holding in her lap a plane (to smooth out the ambitious) on which the word “Concordia” is written. The significance is very clear: from the Wisdom of God descends human Justice in all its form, and from Justice there comes Concord or harmony in the life of the city. From Concord, there is a procession of citizens of different social conditions. ...The procession moves towards an elevated platform where seven people are seated, six of whom are women with their names written above them; they are the virtues *Pax*, *Fortitudo*, *Prudentia*, *Magnanimitas*, *Temperantia*, and *Justitia*. In the middle is a dignified old man with a sceptre in his right hand who represents the City of Siena; above his head are the traditional figures of the theological virtues *Fides*, *Caritas* and *Spes*. Read in reversed order, one understands that prosperity and activity in the areas of work, artisanry and education...are the mature fruits of a civic life guided by the Virtues cultivated in harmony among citizens, a Concord that in turn arises from the Justice administered by those who govern, which in turn is drawn directly from divine Wisdom.”²⁸

The core message of the above imageries is then presented beautifully as follows:

“Created for the seat of government of a free republic, these frescoes offer a typically Christian vision of a world whose external order results from an internal order that men and women receive as a gift, but that must also be chosen with responsibility. They are images of both the spiritual transience and the concrete social situation of the thinkers of the period, with their sure faith in God, the principle of all truth and every form of social life and organization.”²⁹

From these perspectives, we can aver that an image of a transformed society is not simply in terms of re-building a nation-state or institutions of a particular political interest. While these are not entirely precluded, a transformed society is the result of a formed and transformed members of a given society. It is, thus, people-oriented, having to do with the formation and transformation of a people. This goes to explain why I began this research with exploring the christological experience of people at the grassroots in relation to their shared longing for the transformation of the society in which they live and believe (see subsection 1.1 of chapter 1). More importantly, in this light, a transformed society is the outcome of a people whose social vision and social practices image the life of Christ. That is to say, a transformed Africa consists of a people who are filled with the knowledge of the One Lord Jesus Christ, and acts in accordance with this knowledge: the knowledge of his loving compassion towards all people, and for the social landscape we have been granted to inhabit together.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi

Christ, the Image of Social Transformation: Towards a Transformative Christology in the African Context

A dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctor's Degree (Ph.D.) in Theology (S.T.D).

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Summary

This dissertation explores the theological and practical connection between faith in Jesus Christ and social transformation in Africa. It reflects on a transformative view of Christ as the image of God's ongoing, healing, liberating, and loving action in African society. Specifically, the question it investigates is whether, and how, christological images like healer, liberator and king can provide resources for Christian belief and theology that could bring about much needed societal change.

In order to engage in constructing a robust socially transformative Christology, this dissertation utilizes insights from Jon Sobrino's historical Christology. It is argued that there is a need for a more critical appropriation of the images of Christ in terms of three closely interwoven christological themes. They are: (1) the enhanced *relationship* of Christians with Christ and other human beings, (2) the empowered *agency* of Christians as an outflow of this relationship, and (3) the embodied *practices* of solidarity, both within and beyond ecclesial communities, as the form of Christian discipleship. These christological aspects – relationship, agency, and praxis – are grounded in the most fundamental reality, which is the reality of God the Son who became human and consubstantial with humanity. From an investigation of these themes emerges an understanding of how Christ transforms society, as well as how christological images provide resources for transformative Christian social engagement in Africa. This line of thinking is developed in four chapters.

Chapter 1 examines the images of Christ as healer, liberator and king which are popular in various grassroots Christian communities of Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. It discusses the narratives of meaning and functions of these images in the day-to-day, real lives and faith experiences of many Christians. It is argued that, in spite of the limitations in the understanding and actual operation of the images, they bear a prophetic potential for social transformation if they are more critically appropriated. Chapter 2 presents and evaluates how various African theologians have tried, however insufficiently, to explore the socially transformative potential of the christological images of healer, liberator and king.



Chapter 3 enters into a critical-creative dialogue with Jon Sobrino's historical Christology. Sobrino's use of the model of Christ's historical existence (earthly life and mission) as "incarnate divinity" helps him to explore the relation between faith in Jesus Christ and social transformation. Chapter 4 fleshes out the normative content and concrete implications of the model, as they relate to Christian faith and social transformation in Africa. This chapter also reflects on the significance of the insights therefrom, for (1) the pursuit of a social transformation-oriented Christology, (2) reinforcing the social mission of the Church, and (3) the possibility of integrating a Christ-centred vision and ethic in the social sphere. Finally, the chapter concludes by emphasizing the need for Christians, who engage in society, or long for social transformation, to remain open to how Christ, by the working of the Spirit, continues to transform the social order in ways beyond their imagination.

Annexed Theses:

- 1.** The African experience of Christ is inherently concerned with social transformation. Images of faith in Jesus Christ can provide resources for social vision and practices that could bring about positive change in African societies.
- 2.** The intrinsic relationship between grassroots and academic Christologies consists in paying critical-empathetic attention to vital issues of personal and social transformation, which are at the intersection of faith in Christ and the concrete realities of people.
- 3.** The notions of (a) enhanced *relationship* with Christ and with other human beings, (b) empowered *agency* as the outcome of this relationship, and (c) enacted *practices* of solidarity, are the christological trajectories for societal transformation in Africa and elsewhere.
- 4.** The essential task of Christology is not just speaking *about* Christ, but *to* Christ and *with* him, and doing so, particularly in the light of the faith responses of believing communities and their challenging social conditions. This means that the practice of (a transformative) Christology is sustained as contemplative exercise, and carried out as compassionate social engagement.
- 5.** Christological images can be presented as groundings for, and complementary to, psychological, anthropological, ethical, and sociological categories, which are vital for discerning, articulating, and commending an inclusive social vision and practices of individual and communal flourishing.



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