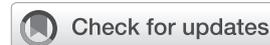


Misrepresentations of African religion: Exploring the poverty of Western religious experience

**Author:**Julius Gathogo^{1,2,3} **Affiliations:**

¹Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History, Missiology, College of Humanities, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Kenyatta University, Mombasa, Kenya

³Department of Theology, Faculty of Theology, All Nations Christian Church International University, Amarillo, Texas, United States

Corresponding author:

Julius Gathogo, juliusgathogo120@gmail.com

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The article sets out to understand the misconceptions and misrepresentations of religion in general and African religion in particular and how these fallacies have affected the latter since they entered the global scene. This also drives us to historicise religious discourses and eventually consider how its apologists and/or scholars of religion have responded since the first half of the 20th century. Have the African indigenous resources contributed positively in enriching Christianity and in building a *theologia africana*, and is the 'poverty of Western Religious Experience' the main factor that fuels the misunderstandings and falsifications? As part of the 50th commemoration of research in theology and religion, particularly through the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR) at the University of South Africa (1975–2025), it strives to account for the scholarly developments that have triggered a paradigm shift, a phenomenon where the Gospel and Africa's religio-culture are engaged in a dialogue of purpose that strives to offer authentic Christianity in Africa amid critics of such initiatives. It is conceptually informed by Cornelius Willem du Toit's contrast between the 'poverty of western religious experiences' and African spirituality.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Through its theo-historical-analytical design, this research article adds value to our knowledge of (South) African religion and the interdisciplinary world of academia by drawing its theoretical framework from the multidisciplinary works of Professor Cornel du Toit. It demonstrates RITR's works, in the last 50 years (1975–2025), as an interdisciplinary enterprise that seeks to effectively address contemporary African concerns.

Keywords: African religion; African theology, Du Toit; misrepresentation of African religion; Research Institute for Theology and Religion; Western concepts.

Introduction

Although there are 'no religious founders' or 'national founders' of the African religion, as noted in John Mbiti's (1970a:191) works, it is worthwhile to appreciate that African ancestors, who handed it over to their descendants, are the de facto initiators. As an academic treatise, the African indigenous religion and/or African religion has suffered the indignity of earning its spokespersons who are not necessarily its subscribers and who have constantly misrepresented it (Olademo 2008). Since the 19th century, when the British Anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), brought out the theory of Animism (Tylor 1871), the African religion has wrongly been viewed in some quarters as animistic or as non-religious at all. To some, a study of the African religion is outdated and/or unnecessary, as revelation has come through the Christian Testament. This is particularly seen among some evangelical institutions in Africa. They fail to appreciate that a study of the African indigenous religion is a significant way of understanding the African personality (Mbiti 1969). In post-colonial Africa, the envois of African religion have largely tended to be Christian theologians whose bias is easily noticeable. Indeed, the conception that the entire belief system in Africa and its philosophy are in error or non-existent has always blurred the reality (Olademo 2008). Hence, degrading classifications have always come to the fore in all manner of names: refer to traditional religion, ancient religion, outdated religion, irrelevant religion, primitive religion, animism, fetishism, deism, pantheism, polytheism, paganism, idolatry and ancestral religion, among others (Mbiti 2003).

As will be noted in this treatise, the post-industrial revolution's sociologists of religion and/or post-18th century scholars of religion in continental Europe (refer to Tylor, Fazer, Durkheim, Malinowski and others) birthed the philosophy behind 'the poverty of Western religious experience' that has remained a contemporary concern right into the 21st century (Endersby 2016). In other words, they impoverished their global appeal of understanding religion when

they overplayed the Western perspective, as they universalised it. Despite their great efforts that began the systematic study of religion in concrete terms, they ushered in the misrepresentations and misconceptions of indigenous religions that are evident to date, albeit unconsciously. In other words, they offered positivist theories of religion, the indigenous ones in particular, in their bid to understand the religious worldview (Endersby 2016). These theories attempted to explain the origins of religion from a rationalist and biased perspective.

As a concept, positivism's central thesis is that we can only understand things empirically (through experiences and observations) (Endersby 2016). Characteristically, positivist traditions were dismissive of religious dialogues, as religion is seen as an erroneous belief of individuals who would vanish because of the scientific breakthroughs that were to be achieved eventually (Gathogo 2013). As the European missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries entered several corners of Africa while armed with Western education and/or Western science, it was easily assumed that the indigenous religions would die out (Mbiti 1969). However, this did not happen, as post-missionary Africa in the 21st century is still wrestling with religio-cultural elements that have refused to give way to the expected 'new normal'. In particular, Darwinism was viewed as the way in which irrational irreligiosity was to be recoiled and/or obliterated from the face of the world (Van Niekerk 2018).

Since the 1930s, several publications that sought to express the wealth of African indigenous resources have come up, though their authorships were not necessarily responding to the positivist theories of religion of the 19th and 20th century Europe. Such publications include *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* by Jomo Kenyatta (1938), which argues that the African indigenous systems had clear systems or religious and social systems and/or structures from time immemorial. Another publication is the *Bantu philosophy (La Philosophie Bantoue)* by Placide Tempels (1945), which argues that the indigenous peoples had an implicit but reasonable philosophy. While *Facing Mount Kenya* was authored by a Kenyan African, Jomo Kenyatta (1889–1978), *Bantu Philosophy* was authored by Placide Frans Tempels (1906–1977), who was a Belgian Franciscan missionary in the Congo (Gathogo 2022). Other related publications that appear to have responded perceptively to the positivists of the 19th and 20th centuries' agenda of systematic study of religions, mainly indigenous ones, include: *Religion in a Tswana Chieftdom* by B. A. Pauw (1960), *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief* by Bolaji Idowu (1962), *African ideas of God: symposium* by E. W. Smith (1962), *Primal vision: Christian presence amid African religion* by J. V. Taylor (1963), *African religions and philosophy* by J. S. Mbiti (1969), *The concept of God in Africa* by J. S. Mbiti (1970a), *Christianity and traditional religions in Africa* by J. S. Mbiti (1970b), *God, ancestor or creator* by Harry Sawyerr (1970), *African traditional religion: a definition* by B. Idowu (1973), *African traditional religion* by Geoffrey Parrinder (1974), *The Prayers of African Religion* by J. S. Mbiti (1975a), *An Introduction to African Religion* by J. S. Mbiti (1975b), *The image of God*

among the Sotho-Tswana by G. M. Setiloane (1976), *West African traditional religion* by K. A. Opoka (1978) and *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* by J. N. K. Mugambi (1989), among others. These publications did not, however, erase the misconstructions and misrepresentations that the African religion enjoys right into the 21st century.

Methodology

In employing quantitative data collection methods, this treatise reviews relevant literature that helps us understand the nature of misrepresentations and misconceptions of the African religion and further surveys its relevance to the 21st-century discourses. This is done by retracing it from 1859 when a British scientist, Charles Darwin (1809–1882) released his book: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, which ushered in the theory that all species evolve over time and that all life forms trace their evolutionary growth from a collective ancestor. This ground-breaking treatise ushered in evolutionary theories that inspired the likes of Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Emile Durkheim and others who began a systematic study of religion from this backdrop. Through a systematic sampling of various misrepresentations and misconceptions of religion, and African religion in particular, the article will strive to understand how these grounded theories of the 19th century form the concept of the 'poverty of western religious experience' as opposed to the wealth of Africa's religio-cultural resources. By dialoguing with the likes of Tempels (1945), Setiloane (1976), Mbiti (1969), Idowu (1973) and others who have attempted to respond to the positivists' perspectives, it enriches our dialogue in this matter. The article utilises theo-historical-analytical design purposively to understand these misconceptions and misrepresentations of the African indigenous religion substantially.

Conceptual clarifications

In his research article, 'African spirituality and the poverty of Western religious experience', Cornelius Willem Du Toit (1998a) captures the misrepresentation of the African religion and its resultant spirituality. Du Toit (1998a), however, does not address case-by-case areas of misrepresentation save for his drawing of our attention to the poverty of Western religious experience, which has always remained elusive among the scholars of religion for quite some time. In other words, Du Toit (1998a) captures the intellectual poverty of the Western religious practice, which fails to connect the social fabric with the natural world. While appreciating the inclusive nature of African spiritual discourses, which are acutely interwoven in the day-to-day activities of the society, he implies that Africa's religio-spirituality has something to offer to the Western religious experience that departmentalises life into different entities. Indeed, Du Toit (1998a) appears to be singing from one hymn book with Africa's religio-indigenous Ubuntu philosophy, which contends that one's humanity is intertwined with the rest of the global society as opposed to the reliance on acculturative gestures of the most dominant (Gathogo 2025).

In his article, 'The place of African hermeneutics in understanding the dynamics of African theology', Du Toit (1998b) critiques John Parratt (1983), an ex-professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham, for displaying insensitivity to 'the nature of African culture and the hermeneutics' as his proposals are:

[S]till solidly embedded in the Western world-view, culture and literary theory, epistemology, view on the nature of truth, and so on, which have all changed since the time Parratt wrote his article [*in 1983*]. (p. 365)

Du Toit goes on to say:

Not only has the religious point of growth shifted from north to south; the southern growth point also has interesting features. It is not a duplication of Western Christianity, it has a deep spiritual strength, it operates within an oral culture, it is free from Western metaphysical constraints, it renders important critique on Western culture, science and technology and it offers an alternative to Western forms of doing theology, succeeding in relating [*via*] interesting ways [*from the perspective of*] traditional religious ideas [*which dialogues*] with those [*that were*] brought to Africa. Faith in the West has lost its innocence and is seen as an ever-interpreting faith seeking, [*which is indeed*] a second naiveté ... Although Africa is critical of Western interests, it can offer them this religious innocence which is still intact in African communities. (p. 366)

While Africa's religio-spirituality offers a richer and an all-inclusive approach that contrasts the individuality of the Western religious practice, Du Toit's (1998a) treatise demonstrates that the detached Western trajectories encounter, consciously or unconsciously, a worrying poverty of religio-spiritual fulfilment. This position is in tandem with Jesse Mugambi's (1989), who appreciates the six main pillars of culture, that is, religion, economics, politics, kinship, aesthetics and ethics. While also concurring with John Mbiti (1969) that religion permeates all departments so fully that it cannot be isolated from any facet of the African worldview, Mugambi (1989) avers that one cannot do substantial religious scholarship or theologise effectively by isolating some or any pillar of culture. Like Du Toit (1998a), Mugambi (1989) and Mbiti (1969) are vouching for a holistic-religious experience that permeates the vicissitudes of life in its entirety. In a sense, the trio are simply saying that the detached Western religious practices, which lack connection to the natural world and the social fabric, further lack the intellectual wherewithal to judge the indigenous African religion, or any other indigenous religion, as it is an all-inclusive enterprise whose concern for the other (Ubuntu) enriches the religio-social experiences of the people. Thus, its wealth of religious experience ought to be viewed as its main strength rather than the reverse (Du Toit 1998a).

With misrepresentative jargons coming from the Western worldview (refer to ancient religion, outdated religion, irrelevant religion, primitive religion, animism, fetishism, polytheism, paganism and so on), the need to understand the poverty of our religious experiences across the religio-social divides becomes a necessity (Olademo 2008). Who knows?

The 'innocence' of indigenous religions may be the right trajectory that we may need to refer to, as we fight to overcome the poverty of our socio-religious experiences. Indeed, the religio-spiritual poverty of the so-called 'Christian countries' in Africa, as in the case of Zambia, which is 96% Christian, Seychelles at 95%, Rwanda at 94%, Namibia at 90%, Lesotho at 90%, Cape Verde Islands at 89%, Gabon at 88%, Uganda at 87%, Zimbabwe at 87%, Liberia at 86%, Kenya at 85%, South Africa at 80%, Malawi at 80%, Angola at 75%, Burundi at 75%, Botswana at 72%, Ghana at 71%, Cameroon at 65%, Ethiopia at 64%, Eritrea at 63%, South Sudan at 61% and Tanzania at 61% (Johnson et al. 2017), justifies the need to understand Christianity in Africa, as was presented by the missionary enterprises of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is ironic that some of the most Christian countries in Africa have low gross domestic products (GDPs) and are indeed struggling to pay the domestic and foreign debts, constantly experience genocide and internal displacements, are under camouflaging dictatorships posing as democratic regimes, experience big men syndromes across the social divides, characterised by civil wars and ethno-racial tensions among other tests. It is baffling to experience intolerance, wars, deaths, abductions, refugees and displaced peoples' crisis, massive poverty, high levels of illiteracy, corruption, starvation on a mass scale, hunger and deprivation and so on, in a predominantly westernised-Christian Africa. Does this point to a poverty of the religio-social experience? Does this point to the failure to appeal to the religio-indigenous Ubuntu philosophies that view dialogue as the hallmark of authentic civilisation? This may drive us to view the poverty of the Western religious experiences, now inculcated in Africa through Christianity, which was introduced in a Western attire, as a critical source of these challenges. Or perhaps, the post-Berlin conference of 1884/85, where Africa was partitioned into 54 states, may take the real blame, as it promoted imperialistic ways of being dismissive of others' socio-religious worldviews (Gathogo 2020). With its emphasis on religio-spiritual exercises being knotted with the day-to-day discourses and communitarian epistemology rather than the individualisation of the latter, Africa's religio-indigenous trajectory may turn out to be the proverbial stone that the builders (Jewish leaders) rejected but ultimately became the cornerstone and/or the most important foundation (Ps 118:22).

In a nutshell, the key point in Du Toit's (1998a) concept of 'African spirituality and the poverty of Western religious experience' can be summed up by appreciating several points. Initially, Du Toit (1998a) contrasts the concept of God in Western religions as a singular transcendent being, while in Africa's religio-spirituality, God is viewed as a more multifaceted presence that is overtly manifested in the cosmos, including through ancestral lineages. Besides this, the holistic nature of the African indigenous context contrasts with the Western way of classifying religio-spiritual practices as separate from the mundane. Hence, the latter integrates moral-spiritual beliefs with all aspects of human well-being and nature. Unlike the Western religiosity, where ancestral connection is barely emphasised, the African indigenous

context puts more emphasis on ancestors as critical players in matters of consultancy and guidance or as the situation demands (Idowu 1973). The fact that ancestors are actively involved in the lives of the people points to the wealth of Africa's religio-spirituality, as opposed to the poverty of the Western religious experience (Mbiti 1969). Although the missionary, colonial and globalisation factors have significantly influenced the religio-cultural spirituality in post-colonial Africa, the communal dimension has not erased its ritualistic nature, the communal hold and the overt appreciation of diversity, as 'the story of the Tower of Babel (Gn 2:1-9) affirms pluralism as part of God's economy for the world' (ed. Pobee 1997:24).

Some misrepresentations and misconceptions

Animistic and primitive

As implied above, the post-industrial revolution's vibrant studies on religion went hand in hand with a hotchpotch of misrepresentations of indigenous religion since 1859 when the British scientist Charles Darwin (1809-1882) released his book: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. His emphasis on evolution captured the likes of the British anthropologists, such as Edward Tylor (1871), who ushered in an evolutionary theoretical framework in understanding religion. In view of this, Tylor (1871) contended that religion evolved through various stages: animism, pantheism, polytheism and graduated into monotheism as its highest score. Prior to this, Darwin in 1859 advanced the view that variation among species occurs randomly, where a person's traits can be inherited by his or her progeny and where the struggle for existence favours only those with favourable traits (Endersby 2016). In building his natural selection theory, Darwin used fossils and similarities between related living organisms, a phenomenon that the likes of Tylor (1871) used to understand religion as a natural progression rather than a deliberate individual or communal contribution. As a concept, animism is derived from the belief that all natural things, inter alia, birds, stones, animals, fish, plants and insects, have spirits or souls. Animism further contends that spirits migrate from one nature to another. After the animistic stage, Tylor (1871) insisted that primal religions evolved, as a growth trajectory, to polytheism (belief in many gods) and subsequently proceeded to monotheism (belief in one supreme deity), as is the case of Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam and Christianity). With African indigenous religious discourses being seen as animistic by the Western world, Tylor (1871) could pass on as the father of the misrepresentation of the former, a phenomenon that follows us like a shadow and refuses to go right into the 21st century.

Primitive science

Another British anthropologist is James George Frazer (1854-1941), Tylor's (1871) contemporary, who viewed religion as an appeal to the supernatural beings in its quest for solutions to the problems that cannot be fully solved by magic

(Fleure 1941; Frazer 1890). While viewing magic as radically different from religion, he considered the former as a form of primitive science, a progression that was inspired by the breakthroughs of science and technology that came with the success of the industrial revolution in Europe (Cameiro 2003; Gathogo 2023). To this end, Frazer (1890) viewed culture from three stages: a phenomenon where it began as magic. It then progressed and/or evolved into religion and reached its zenith as a science (Frazer 1890). In its second stage (religion), he hypothesised that it assumes two forms: worship of nature (animism) and worship of experiences (Fleure 1941; Frazer 1890). In viewing science as the ultimate and ideal religion, he viewed it as the one that discovers the causal relationship among events and physical objects. In viewing Christianity as in the third stage (science), his misconception and misrepresentation easily made him and his neo-Frazers to view indigenous religion as existing within false causality between natural activities and rituals and animism (magic). Neo-Frazers who included anthropologists and some European missionaries of the 19th and 20th century Africa easily found themselves hooked in his school of thought. Indeed, through his best-selling book, *The Golden Bough* (Fleure 1941), he influenced a huge number of scholars and religious practitioners alike. Such include: Sigmund Freud, Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung and Bronislaw Malinowski and numerous poets and artists, among others. Ripples are that they all contributed to the misconception and misrepresentation of the African religion among other indigenous faiths. This state of things has remained, albeit with resistance by African scholars, since the 19th century.

Totemic and pantheistic

Besides Tylor and Frazer, David Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), a French Sociologist of Religion, contributed to the misconception and misrepresentation of indigenous religions, African religion inclusive. Billed as one of the great thinkers who designed social science, as we know it today, Durkheim stands in the league of Max Weber and Karl Marx (Mckinnon 2014). Uniquely, Durkheim devoted his time studying religion in the indigenous societies, with a bias to Protestant and Catholic assemblies. Although his scientific research was clearly focussed on the Australian aborigines, his book publication: *Les forms elementaires de la vie religieuse* (*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1912) influenced some of the wrong perceptions about indigenous societies and their resultant religio-cultures, and this has remained since the 20th century (Durkheim 1912; Mckinnon 2014). In this book, Durkheim (1912) contends that religion originated in totemism, a phenomenon in which human beings are seen to have a mystical relationship with spirit-beings, as in the case of stones, plants, animals and other objects. The view that primal religions originated in totemism made them appear pantheistic in their beliefs, a phenomenon where 'god is all, and all is god' (Mbiti 1969). With Africa's religio-culture having lived with countless totems across clans, lineages and nations, from time immemorial, the African religion became an easy target of misrepresentation along this line, as it has been variously described as totemic and pantheistic.

Giving a dog a bad name?

By giving the proverbial dog a bad name so as to justify its killing, the derogatory words and descriptions that were used by the Western scholars against indigenous and/or primal religions were geared towards its obliteration and possibly replaced it with the 'civilised' religions and/or state religions. This took place after the industrial revolution of the late 18th-century Europe and had profound effects on Africa. To 'understand' indigenous and/or primal religions, therefore, these misconceptions had to chip in as scholars wrestled it out. It eventually prepared a strong ground for its total annihilation as Christianity entered Africa through the missionary explosion of the 19th and 20th centuries. This went hand in hand with the misrepresentations that followed suit and were easily embraced by the new African converts to Christianity and later by African theologians who could not understand how indigenous resources can be the raw materials for the Gospel (Kato 1974). As Brimadevi Van Niekerk (2018) has aptly summed it up:

Some Victorian evolutionary thinkers, such as James Frazer, theorised that humanity's mental stages are characterised by magic, followed by religion, culminating in science. Put another way, the notion of the human encounter with the sacred in society will eventually retreat, giving way to secular conditions, and that science and rationality would triumph as a more persuasive means of satisfying human needs. Durkheim [1912] also predicted that modern society will ultimately have no need for [indigenous] religion and that rational thinking and secular institutions would replace religion. Modernity, he argued, would be taken over by rationalisation and as religion declined society would develop into a more complex form. Well, they were wrong. (p. 1)

Van Niekerk (2018) goes on to explain that:

Many modern scholars continued to predict that with growth in literacy, travel, diaspora movements, advancements in technology, mass media and communication, [indigenous] religion would decline. However, while the effects of modernity may have undermined the cohesive force of [indigenous] religion, we now know that [African indigenous] religion is here to stay and that the sacred presents itself in 'new' ways. (p. 1)

African traditional religions or African religions?

Besides the earlier misrepresentations and misconceptions of the 19th and 20th centuries by the European writers and practitioners of other faiths, the African religion in post-missionary and post-colonial Africa has failed to earn its rightful description(s). That is, should it be referred to as African religions (plural) or an African religion (singular)? Is it an African traditional religion (ATR) in singular or in its plural form? Is it an ancient religion or a modern religion? Is it relevant to the modern living in tropical Africa of the 21st century? Is the poverty of the Western religious experience (as seen in the works of Tylor, Durkheim, Frazer and Freud) the main factor that is evident in its misconceptions and misrepresentations or are some African scholars, theologians in particular, guilty of these errors as well? Has du Toit's

theoretical model the panacea for unveiling this concern? While treating the latter from the point of reverse psychology, it is worthwhile to concede that over 200 years of misconceptions and misrepresentations make the whole concept of the 'poverty of western religious experiences' the proverbial rat trap, which traps the latter and other smaller animals that pass by. In other words, the 21st century and the last half of the 20th century have witnessed new customers in the misrepresentations of African indigenous religion across racial, national, gender and historical times; hence the difficulty in unveiling the concern, thus: Is the poverty of Western religious experience the main factor that aids misconceptions of African religion? With African theologians, the missionaries and the earlier European anthropologists playing their diverse misrepresentations of the same, how can the criteria for establishing the main factor be arrived at?

As noted in Gathogo (2009:108), the phrase ATR is a contested phrase, as 'traditional' is viewed in some scholarly quarters as amounting to the Christian theologians' bias, as it portrays the African indigenous religion as irrelevant, outdated, archaic, old-fashioned and theologically impotent. It also gives a subtle impression that it lacks a working dalliance with philosophy (reason) and thereby fitting in Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud's view of religion as wishful fulfilment and/or neurotic (Teijeiro 2019). It is Feuerbach who advanced the view that the idea of god or God arises, mistakenly, through human experiences or traditions. Being seen as a religion that is 'driven' from the ancestral lineage, in keeping with the communal patterns, makes the word 'traditional' an unacceptable term. Further, some apologists of the African indigenous religion have advanced:

... [T]he view that it should simply be referred to as 'African Religion' just as there is, for instance, Muslim Religion or Hindu Religion. Some have even argued that with the centre of Christian gravity having shifted to Africa, it is imprecise to talk of African Religion (AR) since Christianity has also become an African Religion. Others would talk of Islam as an African religion. So how do we tell the difference between Christianity and the pre-Christian or pre-Muslim religious discourses in Africa? (Gathogo 2009:108)

Perhaps, in his attempts to address the misconceptions and misinterpretations of African religion by the European scholars and the missionary enterprises and usher in a more respectful academic treatise, Samuel Kibicho (1978:370–388) asserts that African religion did not have to await the God of Christendom for fulfilment. It was a fulfilled entity that resonates with St Paul's (Rm 2:12) position, as he cautioned that sinners without the Law of Moses would be judged without it, which implies that there are other laws within which they will earn God's judgement. In view of this, Kibicho (1978) appears to treat indigenous religions, such as the African religion, as other laws within which people would be judged, hence it's a fulfilled religio-cultural entity. In this understanding, Kibicho (1978) ruled out John Mbiti's (1970b:432) contention that African religion 'should be regarded as preparation for the Christian gospel [*praeparatio evangelica*]. [And that] Christianity does not destroy [African

Religion]'. Mbiti (1970b:436) went on to pontificate that Christianity 'comes [instead] to say YES to [African Religion], and to enrich, to fulfil and to crown [African Religion]'. It is in relying on the indigenous African religion's belief in monotheism that the pre-Christian religious heritage becomes *praeparatio evangelica* for the Christian faith. In so doing, the African indigenous religion and/or African religion is put at par, in Mbiti's (1970b) works, with the Old Testament, as it is seen as the path towards delivering the promise (Christian Testament). In delivering an African Christian theology and/or African theology (*theologia Africana*), Mbiti (1970b) sees Africa's religio-culture as the raw materials that are significant in delivering an African Christian theology effectively. Hence, the indigenous resources remain relevant right into the 21st-century Africa. For how can African Christians understand themselves outside this rich Africa's religio-culture, whose wealth of communitarian epistemology enables it to holistically permeate the vicissitudes of life? (Mbiti 1969). These indigenous resources, in Mbiti's (1970b) view, are equally important in building a uniquely African Christian identity. In view of this, Kwame Bediako (1993:372) affirms Mbiti's (1969, 1970b) position and goes on to pontificate that this is 'the most enduring paradigm' in the latter's works.

By contrasting Mbiti's (1969, 1970a) position on African religion as the preparation for the revelation of Christ, Kibicho (1978) was simply trying to insist that 'there is salvation in every genuine religion' (*in omni genuina religione salus est*), as God in Christ is neither a Muslim nor a Christian. Kibicho's (1978) position also contrasted the pre-Vatican II Church's contention (prior to 1965) on *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Roman Catholic Church there is no salvation) (Knitter 2005:30). In this 'radical' position in Kibicho's (1978) works, one did not have to be a Roman Catholic Christian in order to be saved. Kibicho (1978) also finds support from some African theologians who posit that 'the God of Africa is as good as the God of Christendom if not better' and who include: 'John Gatu ... [Christian R.] Gabba and [Gabriel] Setiloane' (Maluleke 2000:5). Kibicho's (1978) position is also in continuum with Nokuzola Mndende's (2005), a South African Professor of Religion, who expresses her frustration with the poverty of the Western religious experience, as is propounded through missionary Christianity in Africa. She says, thus:

I am writing from the perspective of a believer in and practitioner of African Religion. I am not a Christian. Christianity constitutes one but not the only way to God; there are many ways and African Religion is one of them. South Africa is a multi-religious society. South Africans believe in religious freedom and there is freedom of worship. Whenever Christians speak about African Religion they generally use the plural form, African Religions. All other religions are used in the singular. No religion is monolithic but people look at the common features. We never hear people talking about Christianities, Islams, Hinduisms etc. We cannot, for example, talk about Zulu Religion or Xhosa Religion – African Religion is one. While there are differences in some of the customs and objects used to perform rituals, the underlying principle remains the same. In Christianity there are

also many denominations, bound by one belief (in Christ). The use of the plural when it comes to African Religion is the product of missionary evangelization. (p. 13)

It is worthwhile to appreciate that the sources of African religion include, but are not limited to, oral narratives, African experiences in the world, African histories, language, myths and legends, art and symbols, African beliefs that are handed across the generations, religious personages (such as rainmakers, kings, rulers, priests, ritual elders, diviners, medicine practitioners), songs, dances, drama, proverbs, festivals, community elders (*Athamaki*) and through the natural phenomena (Idowu 1973; Kenyatta 1938; Mbiti 1969). As mediators, African ancestors remain a critical source of the indigenous religion (Kenyatta 1938). Further, in the 21st century, journal articles and books on African religion have become a major source, just as with the case of science and technology, which is becoming a critical partner in preserving Africa's religio-culture.

In considering that the sources of African religion are also found in animal stories, as they were narrated by the previous generations, with minimal adjustments, the wealth of indigenous resources, as implied in Du Toit (1998a, 1998b), becomes evident (Mbiti 1975a, 1975b). These narratives are geared towards counselling, preaching, educating, correcting, rebuking wrong and offering guidance, among others. To this end, a Hyena's story is used to caution against selfishness and greed, a Hare story is narrated so as to caution against cunningness and insincerity, as the Lion symbolises courage and effective leadership or dictatorship to some, among other cases. Such personifications communicate particular messages to our respective audiences and readerships. In light of this, Bediako (1993) underlines the wealth of indigenous resources when he insists that African theology is largely oral and symbolic, as opposed to being written down. It is 'in the open, from the pulpit, in the market-place, in the home as people pray, or read and discuss the Scriptures' (Mbiti cited in Bediako 1993:387). Indeed, 'oral theology [as a by-product of indigenous resources] is a crucial prerequisite to written theology' (Mbiti cited in Bediako 1993:388), as academic writing focusses on the lived-out wealth of experiences of the society that propounds the faith in their daily encounters.

Dissenting voices from within Africa!

In Byang Kato (1974), a Nigerian evangelical scholar who appeared to view theology subjectively as simply bibliology, he embodied an antithesis of the position held by the leading African theologians who appreciated the wealth of indigenous resources and/or African spirituality, as critically important in enriching African Christianity. They include, but are not limited to, Mbiti (1969, 1986), Idowu (1973), Setiloane (1976), Mugambi (1989) and Bediako (1992), among others. Kato (1974) had strongly opposed these initiatives by equating them with syncretism (an unscientific mixture of religious traditions) and universalism (an uncritical

acceptance of all religious variations), among other concepts. Kato (1974) had explained his position, thus:

In rejecting the term African Theology, we are not denying the fact that there is a need for expression of theology in the context of Africa. African theologians need to and can contribute to the further understanding of Biblical theology for the benefit of the Universal body of Christ. There are certain issues peculiar to Africa where only African theologians may be able to speak effectively. (p. 2)

Tokunboh Adeyemo (1997) also followed Kato's (1974) theological position and was certainly immersed in the 'poverty of western religious experience', which fails to appreciate the value of the communitarian epistemological model in African spirituality and other faiths (Heb 10:24–25). Kato's (1974) persuasion about the Bible as propositional truth led him to reject the inculturation (dialogue between the indigenous resources and the Gospel). He simply viewed it as syncretism (an unscientific mix-up of religions), as opposed to the dialogue between the two entities (inculturation). This made Bediako (1997:431) view Kato's (1974) works as 'radical Biblicism'. In defending his turf, which was under attack since Tylor's (1871) days, Bediako (1996:33) argued polemically that the fundamentalists' assertion that the Bible is a storage of data book where propositional truth occupies the central place has to be discarded, as we 'are not given as [a] fixed data'. He viewed Kato's (1974) position as that which stops the recipients of the Bible from participating in its truth, yet mere believing is not enough. To recognise the biblical truth, Bediako (1996) insists, we must participate mentally, intellectually and ritually rather than just asserting it. Certainly, if religion and/or Christianity are just about believing, as fundamentalists would have it, how different could Africa be in the 21st century? Wouldn't its scholars of religion and theology be singing from one hymn book with Edward Tylor (1871), who subjectively defined religion as the mere belief in the supernatural? Such trends promote Du Toit's (1998a, 1998b) concept of the 'poverty of Western Religious experience' which is well propounded in his works but conversely fails to appreciate the wealth of indigenous resources in modern scholarship. It adds to the large vocabularies that are dismissive of indigenous resources, such as totemic, pagan, deistic, docetism, polytheistic, heathenism, syncretism, pantheistic, agnostic, fetish, primitive science, henotheistic and animistic, among other jargons that are phenomenologically fallacious.

Genuine dialogue with Christianity?

In understanding the deficiency of partaking of the gospel within the garment of the concept of 'Poverty of Western Religious Experience', we discover that dialogue with Africa's religio-culture gives it authenticity, identity, wealth and knowledge of purpose. Repairing the damage necessitates genuine dialogue between the Western religious experience and Africa's holistic religio-culture, as dialogue among diverse traditions is critically important in interfaith relations and promotes the general well-being of any given society. As the American theologian, Paul Francis Knitter (1939–), once noted, nothing comes before people's religious identity and

convictions and 'if this identity is threatened, everything must be sacrificed or ventured in order to preserve it' (Knitter 2005:30). Further, in agreement with Paul Tillich's (1886–1965) assertion that 'religion [in real life situations] is our Ultimate Concern' (Tillich cited in Knitter 2005:30), we find the true value of dialogue among diverse theo-religious traditions.

In view of this, dialogue between Western and African religious experiences amounts to peace and understanding of our respective contexts and eventually aids our interpersonal communication. Hans Küng (1928–2021) aptly captures this when he says that there is 'no world peace without peace between religions [and experiences that goes with it]. No peace between the religions without dialogue between religions' (Küng 1991:xv). However, authentic dialogue calls for mutual respect between the two protagonists. The danger is that the spokespersons of Africa's religio-culture are largely African Christian theologians, European expatriates and missionaries, as was previously done by European anthropologists such as Frazer and Tylor, who may not have stepped on the soil of Africa or interacted substantially with the wearers of the African shoe and therefore could not spot where it pinches. Exceptional cases are also visible, as in the case of Professor Nokuzola Mndende (2005), from South Africa's Xhosa nation, and a former professor of religion at Cape Town University. As a matter of fact, dialogue between Western and African religious experiences cannot be performed from a position of bias, prejudice, fake information, ineptitude or mediocrity. Only a non-prejudicial attitude can deliver the promise.

Beside this, it is evidentially necessary for those who are still beholden to the 'poverty of Western religious experiences' and are resistant to dialogue with Africa's religio-culture, to learn from the case of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), where the doors for religious dialogue were closed by a state decree since 1917 when the Bolsheviks (majority) took over after overthrowing the Mensheviks (minority rule) (Rao 2013). After this, the Bolsheviks and their allies occupied administration buildings and other tactical places in Petrograd (renamed Saint Petersburg in 1991 and the second largest city in Russia after Moscow) and eventually forced the relinquishment of Czar Nicholas II (1868–1918) (Rao 2013). Upon Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) taking over, he ruled out any dialogue with religion, which he considered unnecessary for a 'modern' world (Hosking 1998). This strikes a working chord with misconceivers of the African religion who view it as unnecessary in light of 'modern' religions. As Geoffrey Hosking (1998) assessed, Lenin restricted religious worship to selected churches and other places of prayer. He banned the religious instruction of children, and more than 50 000 Russian Orthodox churches prior to 1917 were reduced to merely 4000 by 1939 (Hosking 1998). Its resilience was, however, proved as the Soviet Union was a much more religious nation than the United Kingdom and the larger parts of Western Europe by 1988 (Hosking 1998). It is no wonder that President Gorbachev had to institute a Policy of *Glasnot* (openness), which opened up

dialogue with religious discourses in April 1988. Boris Yeltsin went beyond this when he signed the Religion Bill into law in September 1997. Equally, the resilient character of African religion (Mugambi 1989) calls for greater dialogue between Western and African religious experiences for the greater good of Africa and the rest of the tropics.

Conclusion

The article has ably brought out Du Toit's (1988a, 1988b) concept of the 'poverty of western religious experience' vis-à-vis 'African spirituality'. As in its findings, Du Toit's (1988a) concept or theory of the 'poverty of western religious experience' cannot be blamed on just the earlier European anthropologists, the missionary enterprises and the imperial regimes. Rather, scores of African scholars have been hooked into it, as they offer downright dismissals of the holistic-Ubuntu wealth of Africa's religio-culture (African spirituality), particularly the African Christian theologians whose bid to preserve the purity of the gospel has pushed them into the rigid spirituality, which is not holistic enough.

From the outset, the research article sets on the premise that the post-industrial revolution's sociologists of religion and anthropologists, such as Tylor, Durkheim, Frazer and others, are consciously or unconsciously the key architects of religious misconceptions and misrepresentations that 'spilled' over from Europe to Africa. This has been the case since the era of the European missionary explosions of the 19th and 20th centuries and the colonial era to the present moment. While it is clear that their dismissiveness of indigenous and/or primal religions as primarily primitive, unscientific, illogical, irrational and animistic, among other pejorative tags, they offered a double-edged sword that ironically launched the systematic study of religion in concrete terms. In view of this, the African religion has suffered heavily from this 'poverty of western religious experience', which has been parcelled and marketed through the medium of publications.

In attempting to repair the damage, some African scholars who were ideo-morally beholden to the European missionary enterprises of the 19th and 20th centuries wrote on the wealth of Africa's religio-culture (spirituality) and eventually broadened our religious horizons (Idowu 1962, 1973; Kenyatta 1938; Mbiti 1969, 1970a, 1970b, 1975a, 1975b; Mugambi 1989; Opoka 1978; Parrinder 1974; Pauw 1960; Sawyerr 1970; Setiloane 1976; Smith 1962; Taylor 1963; Tempels 1945, among others). Conversely, there are African scholars who got immersed in the Western religious experience and appear to defend the latter: Such include Kato (1974), Parratt (1983) and Adeyemo (1997), among others. In other words, the positivists' theories of religion of the 19th century are still impactful and influential in post-colonial Africa. Nevertheless, the African scholars' quest for a *theologia africana* is largely seen through the various dialogues between culture and the gospel (inculturation). This is evidentially seen through the various publications and in the general practice.

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Author's contribution

J.G. is the sole author of this research article.

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