



A Reflection on African Christian Theology

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ABSTRACT

The African heritage and identity have been intensely religious. Africans carry along their religio-cultural background and tradition wherever they go and in whatever they find themselves doing. Africans embraced Christian theology while having already imbibed and appreciated African theology and identity. Being religious beings, African Christians have sought to appreciate Christian theology through the lens of African theology and heritage. This paper establishes that African Christian theology should go beyond championing African heritage and identity. It should rather be proactive and go a step further to address the challenges and ills of human society in the African setting. This will make it worthy as a source of hope for hopeless Africans in their religious existence. Using secondary data resources from the internet, and published and unpublished literature in the form of books and journal articles, this work discusses African Christian theology and the way forward. It is the ardent hope of the authors that African Christians and theologians develop the need to see theology beyond the lens of the African identity and rather contemplate how theology can be therapeutic to the ills and challenges of the African society.

Keywords: *Christian Theology, African Christianity, African Theology, African Heritage, African Identity*

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INTRODUCTION

The theological thoughts of African Christians are termed African Christian theology. It is imperative for Africans to do theology that relies on African anthropology or the African way of learning. Africans as identified by scholars like John S. Mbiti are notoriously religious which identifies African spirituality as deeply rooted in the African traditional religions.¹ This implies that Africans before the arrival of the western missionaries knew God. Based on this notion, the study stands on the shoulders of African Theologians to debunk the false representation of African Traditional Religions propagated by western missionaries. African Christian Theology focuses highly on two domains, the Christian message in the gospel and the culture of African Christians. Thus, African Christian theology is a theology that is deeply rooted in African culture. Culture, as the way of life of a group of people, signifies their identity and heritage. Much concern of African theology is centered on African heritage and identity. Activists of liberation theology argue that African Christian theology should equally focus on the socio-economic and political needs of the African continent. To achieve this aim of a meeting point, the African church should take a bold step of establishing its identity and equally seek redress in other challenges of the African continent.

¹ Richard Rwiza, "Laurenti Magesa An African Liberation Theologian" in African Theology: *The Contribution of the Pioneers*, ed. Benezet Bujo and Juvenal IIunga Muya, (Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008), 237.

This paper discusses African Christian theology and the way forward. It intends to look into how African Christian theology can be a voice or a tool of hope and therapy to the Africans, both in their religiosity and in all other domains of their existence and survival.

The Nature of African Christian Theology

The pursuit of a definitive African Christian theology gained great concern in academia perhaps in the late 1950s and the 1960s.² Many scholars have attempted to describe African Christian theology in varied ways, yet they all lead in the same direction.

African Christian theology, according to Charles Nyamiti, is the embodiment of biblical Christian doctrine in African mindset and needs.³ Mbiti defines it as a theological reflection and expression by African Christians.⁴ James Okoye explains African Christian Theology as theology that reflects on the gospel, the Christian tradition, and the entire African reality in an African way and from the standpoint of the African worldview.⁵ African theology aims at building Christianity in a uniquely African manner by adapting and incorporating traditional notions and ideas. Humphrey Waweru, in line with Mbiti and Nyamiti, describes African Christian Theology as a theology that is centered on the Biblical faith of African people, which communicates directly to the language of the Africans. He argues that the Christian message about Christ should be made significant to the African context.⁶

Gabriel Setiloane posits that “by African Theology we mean a theology which is based on the Biblical Faith and speaks to the African soul... It is expressed in the categories of thought which arise out of the philosophy and world view of Africans.”⁷ All of the concepts mentioned so far emphasize the fact that African theology aims to present Christianity from an African perspective or integrate Christianity into African cultures. The definitions of Nyamiti and Mbiti imply that the Bible is contextualized to the African continent's unique needs. The goal of African Christian theology is thus to bring the Christian gospel and African religion together. African theologians' definitions attempt to express and comprehend the Bible and God in the context of African experience and culture. Because theology must be conveyed in linguistic and cultural forms that are best understood by the people for whom it is intended, an African theology is required.

Heritage and Identity (Inculturation)

Inculturation or Indigenization expresses the encounter between Christianity and African indigenous religion, which is undoubtedly an encounter between two divergent cultures. According to Waweru, African theologians appreciated that the inculturation or indigenization of Christian thought is definitively the only way to contextualize the Gospel of Christ. He continued to posit that, Africans were so receptive to the gospel message brought by the western theologians, and this in his view brought about the need for African Indigenous Churches (AICs). This brought about preaching, praying, singing, and rhythms that were satisfactory to the African Christians throughout the African continent.⁸ Waweru citing Mbiti stated that “aided by the biblical revelation and faith in Jesus Christ, Africans grounded their approach to Christianity on what they knew best as traditional African

² Benezet Bujo, *African theology in its social context*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1992), 5.

³ Charles Nyamiti, *African Theology: Its Nature, Problems and Methods*, (Kampala: Gaba Publications, 1971), 1.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology*, (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 2.

⁵ James C. Okoye, “International Society for Catholic Theology”.

<http://www.unituebingen.de/INSeCT/african/okoye.html>. Accessed on 16/05/22.

⁶ Humphrey Mwangi Waweru, “African Theology in the 21st Century: Mapping Out Critical Priorities.” *European Scientific Journal* 14(8) (2018): 213-216.

⁷ Gabriel M. Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction*, (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1988), 34.

⁸ Waweru, “African Theology in the 21st Century: Mapping Out Critical Priorities”.

religions”.⁹ Waweru posits that the inculturation of the gospel needs to go on so that Christianity will be deeply rooted in Africa. This brought about the contextualization of the gospel.¹⁰

Inculturation of the gospel message among African theologians helped campaign for the African heritage and identity which was subjugated by the western missionaries. The study has revealed the need for the inculturation of the gospel in the African context. There is however the need to pay attention to liberation theology which equally seeks to theologize pointing to the social, economic and political crisis of the African continent. Aside from focusing on matters of culture, heritage and identity, Nonterah underscores the need to focus on other challenges of the African continent which include the social, economic, and political crises of the African people.¹¹ African theologians have grappled with the issue of disinformation about African religions by Western missionaries. The concern is: How can Christian ideas and practices be synchronized with African beliefs and customs so that Christianity can truly become a religion for Africans?

Justin Ukripo indicates that Christianity has not taken African culture seriously or been substantially interwoven with local culture. The liturgy is used by Ukripo as an illustration of the problem. Several mission-founded churches' liturgy appears disrespectful to Africans, for whom worship is more than just praying and singing. Dancing, drumming, clapping hands, and performing other bodily movements are all part of it.¹² Ukripo quotes Nigerian novelist Onuora Nzeku, who argues that “isn't it a shame that after a hundred years of missionary activities here, Christianity can only boast of millions of hybrids? Converts who are neither Christians nor traditional worshippers, are religious bats who belong to no particular faith, only claiming to be one or the other when it suits their purpose.”¹³

Due to the shortcomings of western theological missions, Kwesi Dickson advocates for interaction between Christianity and African life and ideas.¹⁴ He posits that, because no one knows God's plan in any particular scenario, and because humans lack the ability to fully comprehend the components of the gospel as conveyed by missionaries, the African's contribution could not be out of place. He urges African Christian theology to be taught and practiced in order for the Christian faith to be deep-rooted among African Christians.¹⁵

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology according to Rwiza is an attempt of the deprived to redeem the right of self-determination and self-definition in the context of the prevalent unfriendly world influence and pressures.¹⁶ According to him, “African liberation theologies are attempts of the dispossessed to regain ‘the right of self-determination and self-definition in the context of the prevailing hostile world influence and pressures.’”¹⁷ He goes on to say that genuine liberty and emancipation in Africa are made up of cultural, theological, structural, and psycho-spiritual liberation.¹⁸ The objective of liberation theology is for African Christians to express their faith within their cultural context, reflecting a real study of God. African Christian theology aims to motivate African churches to participate in

⁹ Waweru, “African Theology in the 21st Century: Mapping Out Critical Priorities”.

¹⁰ Waweru, “African Theology in the 21st Century: Mapping Out Critical Priorities”.

¹¹ Interview with Dr. Nora Kofnoterah Nonterah, a Lecturer at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, Ghana. She lectures on African Christian Theology. Interview date: 22/03/2022.

¹² Zablun Nthamburi, “Toward Indigenization of Christianity in Africa: A Missiological Task,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* (1989):114, <http://internationalbulletin.org/issues/1989-03/1989-03-112-nthamburi.pdf>. Accessed on 12/07/22.

¹³ Nthamburi, “Toward Indigenization of Christianity in Africa: A Missiological Task,” 114.

¹⁴ Joseph M.Y. Edusa – Eyison, “Kwesi A. Dickson: The Bible and African Life and Thought in Dialogue” *African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, ed. Benezet Bujo and Juvenal Ilunga Muya, (Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008).110.

¹⁵ Edusa – Eyison, “Kwesi A. Dickson: The Bible and African Life and Thought in Dialogue”, 110.

¹⁶ Rwiza, “Laurenti Magesa An African Liberation Theologian,” 237.

¹⁷ Rwiza, “Laurenti Magesa An African Liberation Theologian,” 237.

¹⁸ Rwiza, “Laurenti Magesa An African Liberation Theologian,” 237.

addressing the issues raised by western theologians. Nora Nonterah posits that African Christian theology aside from inculturation or indigenization of the gospel seeks to find other methodology of theologizing that deals with interpreting the gospel message that could hear the voices of the Africans.¹⁹

Liberation theology which began in the early 60s has three main aspects. The first aspect is centered on the indigenous socio-economic system, the second aspect takes after the Latin American Liberation model, and the third aspect involves a combination of the elements from both approaches. According to Waweru, these waves seek genuine human promotion in the context of the poverty and political struggles of the African continent.²⁰

Liberation theology, according to Jesse Mugambi, advocated praxis as a means of theologizing, linking theory to practice and deriving theory from practice. Academicians were pushed by the movement to join the masses in the fight for economic justice. The African liberation movement looked for scriptural interpretations that would free Africans from poverty, injustice, and exploitation.²¹

The Essence of African Christian Theology

The above scholastic formulations of African Christian Theology raise concerns regarding the necessity of African Theology. According to Waweru, the first element of African Christian Theology is to ensure that Christian theology can cooperate with African culture on a level basis by giving African expression to the Christian faith within a theological context.²² This entails a deliberate debate between missionary Christian thinking and African religious thinking to be able to develop a counterpoint for incorporating Christianity into African people's lives and cultures.

Mbiti, Nyamiti and other well-intentioned theologians see the need for a theology that is culturally relevant to Africans, as well as other peoples and places around the world. This is something Harry Sawyer emphasizes.

The church in Africa is faced with a clamant demand for an interpretation of the Christian faith, in a sanguine hope that such an interpretation, when produced, would provide a means of bringing home to Africans the truths of the Christian gospel in an idiom related to the African situation.²³

This is due to the fact that all theology is done in context. The embodiment of God is the divine purpose for making the gospel logical and understandable to humans, and African theology is no different.

The most important need for African theology, according to Sawyer, is to develop methods to interpret Christ in such a way that Africans feel comfortable in the new faith.²⁴ Because Europeans have historically dominated Christian beliefs, African Christian Theology must widen its scope. This is to adapt Derrick Mashau and Martha Fredericks' notion, which holds that there are lived theologies and academically established theologies, and that lived theologies in Africa trace back to the establishment of Christianity on the African continent. Only African theologians, if Mashau and Frederick are accurate, are capable of dealing with the issue of western supremacy in Christian theology.²⁵

The centrality of African theology was highlighted by the political context of the 1950s and 1960s. Following the independence of several African countries, African Christians thought it unusual

¹⁹ Interview with Nora Kofnoterah Nonterah.

²⁰ Waweru, "African Theology in the 21st Century: Mapping Out Critical Priorities."

²¹ Jesse N.K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*, Nairobi: EAEP, 1995, 40.

²² Waweru, "African Theology in the 21st Century: Mapping Out Critical Priorities," 216.

²³ Harry Sawyerr, "What is African Theology?" in *A Reader in African Theology*, ed., John Parratt; (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 22.

²⁴ Sawyerr, "What is African Theology?" 22.

²⁵ Derrick Mashau, & Martha Frederiks, "Coming of age in African theology: The quest for authentic theology in African soil," *Exchange* 37, (2008):115 -201. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157254308X278549>.

that the church remained mostly governed by European missionaries, despite the fact that African countries had acquired political independence.²⁶ Missionaries were sheltered by colonial authorities, according to Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, and this protection assisted the spread of the western church in most African countries.²⁷ This rationale, they claim, justified the growth of African churches in terms of membership and theology.

The rediscovery and appreciation of African culture and religion are at the heart of African theology. According to Nkansah-Obrempong, theologians began reinterpreting the Christian faith in ways that reflect this identity and heritage, so that Africans might understand and relate to the Christian faith as something which is theirs. These cultural and socio-political movements established the basis for African indigenization or inculturation theology, which views African religion and culture as vital sources of theological reflection on the Christian faith. The black movement in southern Africa contributed to liberation theology at the same time.²⁸ In the view of James Nkansah-Obrempong, these events spawned the two primary streams of African theologies of inculturation or contextualization and emancipation. The effort to understand and address the specific needs and hopes of each human group and person on their terms and in all of their dimensions whether religious, cultural, political, social, and economic and to determine what the gospel actually says to people in that context is known as inculturation or contextualization.²⁹ Africans considered that the European missionaries underestimated African culture. Following independence, Africans fought to promote the dignity of the African people along with the value of African culture and religion.

Geoffrey Parrinder was a leading role in recognizing black dignity at the time. Simultaneously, the early 1970s Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, as well as Steve Biko's work, underlined the African's dignity in the face of exploitation by a white minority-controlled government. Many African Christians have been influenced by these factors to believe that African culture and contemporary events should not be dismissed as pagan, but rather taken seriously. Missionaries in most regions of Africa had made the mistake of undervaluing African customs and culture prior to this new understanding and freedom.³⁰

African theology highlights the attempts by the oppressed to reclaim the right of self-determination and self-definition in the face of aggressive world influence and pressures.³¹ Kwesi Dickson decries the foreignness attached to Christianity in Africa. Dickson further goes on to say that, for the Church in Africa to be authentic, it needs to be extricated from all European encumbrances and relate the gospel to African life and thought.³²

Based on African Christian theology beyond the consideration of African heritage and identity, these positions of Megasa and Richard Rwiza suggest that African Christian Theology should go beyond the heritage and identity (inculturation) of the gospel message and seek the need to equally theologize the biblical interpretation relating to poverty, oppression and injustice of the African people.

The Way Forward for African Christian Theology

One of the issues facing African Christian theology, according to Waweru, is the persistence of African socio-political, economic, and theological instability, which continues to be a challenge to the African faith. According to him, poor administration and the exploitation of ethnic and religious divides have exacerbated African poverty. Many Africans have been duped and deceived, leaving them feeling betrayed, disillusioned and puzzled.

²⁶ Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Developing World*, (London: Chapman, 1978), 266.

²⁷ Torres and Fabella, *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Developing World*, 266.

²⁸ James Nkansah-Obrempong, 'Evangelical theology in Africa: Ways, perspectives, and dilemmas', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34(4), (2010): 293.

²⁹ Mashau & Frederiks, 'Coming of age in African theology: The quest for authentic theology in African soil', 119.

³⁰ Fashole, Luke in Christianity in Independent Africa, 357. – Check this reference again and write it correctly.

³¹ Rwiza, "Laurenti Magesa An African Liberation Theologian,"237.

³² Edusa – Eyison, "Kwesi A. Dickson: The Bible and African Life and Thought in Dialogue,"95.

Also, despite the growing number of Christians in Africa, African theology has mostly remained in the academic realm and African devotees are still disunited on which practices to accept and which ones to Africanize. To maintain continuity between African indigenous life and the Christian faith, contextualized African theology is needed since African theology's mission is to assist people in realizing their African sense of humanity.³³

To be able to overcome these challenges, the African church should be independent of the countless and unascertained western aid. They are used by the whites to lure Africans into betraying their identity and heritage. They do so to de-africanize Africans in their religiosity even when they have succumbed to Christianity.

Also, for the Christian faith to have a meeting point with the African setting, African Christian theology should not only reclaim the African identity but should seek to free the African continent from its social, economic and political challenges by using relevant biblical interpretations to address these challenges. Thus, African Christian theology should be branded to play a prophetic role by itemizing the ills of the African society and dealing with them with the maximum seriousness.

It is the view of the writers that, African Christian theology should have a positive bearing upon the transformation of human society not only in the private domain of thought and feeling but also in every aspect of human life and the existence of Africans. The prophetic role of the African church is to empower and encourage its members, among other things, to commit to action in view of service to the human community. Thus, for the African church to successfully achieve its aim as a religious body which proclaims the language of hope and empowers people to face up to the present situations of social, economic, and political injustice and hardships, it must be found making a bold and interrupted move towards establishing and championing a theology that has African interest and morale as a focus.

CONCLUSION

It is needful that African Christian theology fills the cultural gap created by the western missionaries. The whites bequeathed Africa with a theology that provides little voice or hope to anguished Africans. Even in finding solace in the theology left behind, the African ends up becoming more aggrieved. Therefore, African Christians should champion a theology that seeks to find answers to the political, economic and social struggles and inconveniences that have been confronting the African continent for decades. The position of this paper is that, African Christian theology should go beyond championing African heritage and identity. It should rather be proactive and go a step further to address the challenges and ills of human society in the African setting. This makes it a source of hope to hopeless Africans in their religious existence.

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³³ Waweru, “African Theology in the 21st Century: Mapping Out Critical Priorities,” 216.

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