



The Church and Cultural Reconstruction for Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, Christianity is becoming the majority religion in many Sub-Saharan African countries. The impressive number of adherents of the faith however, in most cases, is at odds with the cultural beliefs and practices of the peoples of these nations. From a critical historical perspective, the paper examines the influence of Christianity on selected cultures and argues that organized religion, particularly Christianity, holds the key to the development of Sub-Saharan Africa through cultural reconstruction, starting from the church's sub-culture. Consequently, the paper concludes that African theological reflections, directed towards the challenges of cultural deconstruction and reconstruction within the Church and the larger society, will be able to deepen the roots of the average African Christian and make room for enhanced socio-economic development of Sub-Saharan Africa.

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Publication History

Received 2nd November, 2022

Accepted 3rd January, 2023

Published online 25th January,
2023

Keywords: Church, Culture, Reconstruction, Development

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were only an estimated ten (10) million Christians on the African continent. That figure rose to 143 million in 1970 and then to an estimated three hundred and ninety (390) million in the year 2000.¹ In 2018, Africa became the continent with more Christians than any other with well over six hundred and thirty-one (631) million Christians. Projections are that that figure would double by 2050.² With such impressive figures comes the concern about the lack of depth of the faith in the African soil, the inability of the faith to transform the quality of life of the majority of its adherents on the continent and the preparedness of the average African Christian to remain steadfast in the Christian faith in the face adversity without resorting to help from African traditional religions.³

From a critical historical perspective, we shall examine some of the factors that account for the phenomenal growth of the Christian faith on the African continent and isolate the process of evangelization as a contributing factor to the lack of depth of the African Church and the low quality of life on the continent. To address these problems, this paper advocates the cultural reconstruction of the African Church—a venture that shall seek to replant the seed of the Gospel in the African cultural

¹ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1995), 1.

² Yaw Perbi and Sam Ngugi, *Africa to the Rest: From Mission Field to Mission Force (Again)*, (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2022), 25.

³ Delanyo Adadevoh, *Approaches to Christianization in Africa*, (Brisbane: ILF Publishers, 2000), 10.

context by utilizing the vernacular versions of the Bible, the people's values, norms and philosophies as building blocks for biblical interpretation and theological reflection. Cemented with the imageries, symbols, ideas, experiences, and aspirations both temporal and eternal of the people, such biblical interpretations and theological reflections shall be the soil that will provide depth for African Christianity and grounds for a more meaningful social and economic development of the continent.

Christianity in Africa

As stated above, Christianity is fast becoming the dominant religion in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. Several factors account for this. The first of these factors may be John Mbiti's assertion of Africans being notoriously religious and that religion "permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it".⁴ Everyone in the society belonged to one local deity or the other, and those who did not subscribe to any local deity naturally believed in the existence of a Supreme Being and the continuation of life after death.⁵ Turning, therefore, to the Christian faith and its message of faith in God and the hope of life after death, would not have been too difficult for many Africans. And as a result, as Mbiti would put it many years after his initial assertion of the African being "notoriously religious", "Africa has fallen in love with the Christian faith."⁶

The second reason is that due to the intertwined nature of Christianity and Western culture, adherence to the Christian faith became a status symbol within most African societies during the colonial era. In the Gold Coast (now Ghana) for instance, many indigenes who had made some wealth through the cocoa industry joined the church as an identity of their new status.⁷

The vernacularization of the Scripture has also been considered a major factor for many Africans turning to faith in Christ. According to Lamin Sanneh, many of the missionary organizations that worked in Africa in the 19th century did not only learnt the local vernaculars to be able to communicate the Gospel to the indigenous populations but took a keen interest in reducing the languages into writing and so as to be able to translate the Scriptures for the new converts to read for themselves. That, it is believed, ushered in a fundamental religious revolution that allowed for popular mass participation of Africans in the process of evangelization. The vernaculars became the predominant medium for the assimilation of Christianity.⁸ In the words of Kwame Bediako, the "explosion of Christianity in Africa in the 21st century is largely due to the availability of vernacular Bibles".⁹ And as Sunquist rightly observes, one of the major decisions of Vatican II was to put liturgy and Scripture which had hitherto been in Latin, into local languages. As a result of this, "religious practices and beliefs were brought into the lives, families, and villages of Catholics throughout the world" and in Africa, the number of Roman Catholics increased from 12 per cent of the population to 15 per cent from 1966 (after Vatican II) to 1999.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, the vernacular Scriptures aided the establishment of African Initiated Churches (AICs) in the early part of the 20th century. The AICs emerged as hybrids of the mainline missionary-founded churches and African traditional religions. Founded by illiterates or semi-literates, the AICs made extensive use of the vernacular Scriptures. They were very informal in their liturgical expressions and made copious use of African musical forms and rhetorics. Together with the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches that would follow from the 1930s onwards as another factor for the growth of the African Church, the AICs tended to provide healing, deliverance and protection from evil powers.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Pub., 2002), 3.

⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 4.

⁶ John S. Mbiti, *Anthology of African Christianity*, (S.L.: Regnum Books International, 2016), cited in Perbi and Ngugi, *Africa to the Rest: From Mission Field to Mission Force (Again)*, 25.

⁷ Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1855-1960*, Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1966), 14.

⁸ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 159.

⁹ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 60.

¹⁰ Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2015), 108-9.

As a result, these churches are perceived as African in the sense that they are able to fully express the African worldview and so are able to meet the people's expectations from religion.¹¹

It has also been suggested that a major reason for the phenomenal response of Sub-Saharan Africa to the Christian faith in the last century was the latter's close relations with Western education during the colonial and post-colonial eras. Conversion to the Christian faith was imperative to the acquisition of Western education which was and is still perceived as necessary for a comfortable lifestyle. Many parents sent their wards to school purposely to acquire Western education knowing very well that they (their wards) would be converted from traditional religion to Christianity. The church obviously took advantage of the colonial support to establish schools which have immensely contributed to the manpower needs of African nation-states both before and after independence all over the sub-continent. To a very large extent, these five factors contributed immensely to the numerical growth of the African Church.

The phenomenal growth of the African church described above, poses challenges to World Christianity in the areas of Theological Education, Biblical Scholarship, Missiology, Practical Theology and Development theory and praxis. Although each of these is very important for the further growth and stability of the faith on the continent, the rest of this paper will be devoted to the implications of the growth and its relevance to the deep-rootedness and the quality of life of the average African Christian and the subject of the socio-economic development of the continent. As Adadevoh rightly observes, "A major concern of African Christians, however, has been how the faith can improve the quality of life of Africans as a whole".¹² This is not to suggest that the Church has not done anything toward the development of the African continent. The educational systems, medical, and in many cases, economic systems established through the Western missionary enterprise have contributed immensely towards the raising of the living standards of the peoples of Africa. Indeed, the social history of the nations of sub-Saharan Africa cannot be written without reference to the inputs of the Western missionary enterprise of the 20th century. That notwithstanding, the claims of Edmond J. Dunn that "the main goal of the missionary endeavour in earlier times was to gather and maintain within the Church many people as possible to save their souls,"¹³ remains valid. The emphasis of the church's evangelization thrust had always been on the salvation of the souls of the people rather than that of the total human person. It is a fact that Africa, including the African church, is poor and lags behind the other continents in terms of socio-economic development. It is for this reason that Dunn strongly advocates the redefinition of the church's mission mandate to include the integral development of persons¹⁴, and for the African church to play a leading role in redressing the development gap on the continent, it has to redefine itself as well, by (1) the cultural deconstruction of its current state, and (2) the reconstruction of its African cultural expressions for the continual "realization of the kingdom of God ... among every tribe, tongue and nation."¹⁵ In other words, the church in Africa must find its authentic African roots on which to develop its peoples since development cannot occur in a cultural vacuum.

The African Church of Antiquity

Africa had been home to Christianity since its inception in the 1st century AD. The tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has it that the Ethiopian eunuch who came to faith in Jesus Christ and was baptized by Philip the evangelist in Acts 8:26-40 returned home as a witness of Christ. Hence the

¹¹ Komi A. Hiagbe, *Reconciled to Reconcile: An African View of John Calvin's Doctrine of Salvation*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), 21.

¹² Adadevoh, *Approaches to Christianization in Africa*, 10.

¹³ Edmund J. Dunn, *Missionary Theology: Foundations in Development*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), 6.

¹⁴ Dunn, *Missionary Theology: Foundations in Development*, 6.

¹⁵ Perbi and Ngugi, *Africa to the Rest: From Mission Field to Mission Force (Again)*, 25.

beginnings of that church.¹⁶ The footmarks of John Mark, the author of the second Gospel, are also traced to Alexandria in Egypt towards the end of the first half of the 1st century AD. It is believed that John Mark became the Bishop of the Orthodox Church in Alexandria and at one point in history, that church became the local church with the largest number of congregants in the Roman Empire.¹⁷

Christianity developed very rapidly in the communities of Northern Africa, particularly among the Copts of the Upper Nile region of Egypt. The cities of northern Africa became major Christian centres providing some of the keenest intellects and most influential apologists in Christendom—the likes of Origen, Tertullian and Augustine who determined the discourses, debates and cardinal doctrines of the faith at the time. By the end of the third century AD, North Africa was one of the regions on earth with the largest number of Christians besides Armenia and modern Turkey.¹⁸ The Maghreb region, together with Ethiopia and Sudan had very vibrant Christian communities till the beginning of the 7th century AD when Islam took over the region thus, creating a lull in the Christian witness for more than a millennium.

Despite the many centuries of the lull in Christian activism on the continent, the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Ethiopian churches did survive the Islamic invasion of North Africa in the 7th century mainly because they were founded on indigenous cultures. The massive conversion of the Copts to Christianity is believed to have stemmed from their pre-Christian traditional religions which served as a kind of *preparatio evangelica* for the Christian faith. Before their encounter with Christianity, the Copts had reduced the veneration of their many gods to a cult of a triad; Osiris, the father, Isis, his sister and spouse, and Horus, their son was responsible for taking good souls to his father after death. Isis, the mother figure in the triad, protected good people in this life. The Copts identified Christianity as a new version of their traditional religion with correspondence of God the Father as Orisis, Jesus the Son as Horus, and the Virgin Mary as Isis. Thus, Christianity found a home among the Copts very early with the development of vernacular liturgical books and portions of the Scriptures as hallmarks of that church. Among the Copts therefore, faith became a culture and the people, inseparable from their faith—a factor which accounts to a large extent, for the survival of the Coptic Church despite the many challenges it had to deal with over the centuries, including the 7th century (CE) onslaught of Islam on the churches of North Africa.¹⁹

Modern Christian Missionary Enterprise

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, Portuguese sailors attempted to propagate the Catholic Church along the sea routes of the west and southwest Africa, especially in the Congo basin. These efforts were however short-lived. Real resuscitation of Christianity on the continent began in the early part of the 19th century when as a result of the Evangelical revivals in Europe, many missionaries found their way to sub-Saharan Africa. The period also coincided with the peak of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the era of Europe's colonization of Africa. Thus, either as chaplains on the merchant boats or in the forts and castles dotted along the coast, agents of imperial governments, or the many missionary organizations founded in European cities, Africa saw the influx of missionary activity that would leave lasting results on the continent.

That was at a time when “Europe was the faith and the faith was Europe.”²⁰ As a result of the intricate nature of the Gospel and European culture at the time, the European missionary approach to the evangelization process was mainly what Richard Niebuhr describes as “Christ against culture.”²¹ In his Christian classic, *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr delineates five ways cultures respond to the

¹⁶ Ephraim Isaac, “Eunuch of Ethiopia”, *The Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, January 1, 1970. <https://dacb.org/stories/ethiopia/the-eunuch/> (Accessed 18.06.2022)

¹⁷ Bernard Hamilton, *The Christian World of the Middle Ages* (Stround: Sutton, 2003) 138. cited in Perbi and Ngugi, *Africa to the Rest: From Mission Field to Mission Force (Again)*, 3.

¹⁸ Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 2.

¹⁹ Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, 26-7.

²⁰ Dunn, *Missionary Theology: Foundations in Development*, 9-10.

²¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (Broadway NY: HarperCollins, 1956), 61.

Gospel on impact. Firstly, Christ against culture, the Christian is primarily commanded not to love the world nor the things that are of the world. The world in this context is the “realm under the power of evil, the region of darkness into which the citizens of the kingdom must not enter. It is the secular society dominated by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. The world is that sensual, pagan society that was fast approaching extinction and so did not deserve any concern or loyalty.”²² The world, in this context, is indeed the culture and everything that is of human creation or origin. Essentially, the Christian is to reject the prevailing culture and exclusively belong to the brotherhood of believers.

European missionaries saw everything African as evil and barbaric that needed to be replaced with a Gospel shrouded in European culture. African names, music, symbols and values had to be discarded and replaced with European ones which were considered Christian. In some extreme cases, exclusive villages were built for Christian converts to prevent any form of contamination through contact with unbelievers. The overall results of the 19th-century European missionary enterprise in Africa are best illustrated with the following by Dr. D. T. Niles, a Sri Lankan Methodist preacher:

The Gospel is like a seed, and you have to sow it. When you sow the seed of the Gospel in Palestine, a plant that can be called Palestinian Christianity grows. When you plant it in Rome, a plant of Roman Christianity grows. You sow the Gospel in Great Britain and you get British Christianity. The seed of the Gospel is later brought to America, and a plant grows of American Christianity. Now, when the missionaries came to our lands they brought not only the seed of the Gospel, but their own plant of Christianity, flowerpot included! So, what we have to do is to break the flowerpot, take out the seed of the Gospel, sow it in our own cultural soil, and let our own version of Christianity grow.²³

The time has come for the African church to break the flowerpot, take out the seed of the Gospel, and sow it in African cultural soil for the emergence of the authentic African version of Christianity.

According to Niebuhr, the withdrawal and renunciation of aspects of the recipient culture is a necessary element in every Christian life, but that must be followed by an equally necessary movement of responsible engagement in cultural tasks. “Where this is lacking, Christian faith quickly degenerates into a utilitarian device for the attainment of personal prosperity or public peace; and some imagined idol called by his name takes the place of Jesus Christ”.²⁴ Although Christianity and the God of the Christian faith have, to a large extent, degenerated into a “utilitarian device” in sub-Saharan Africa, it is not entirely the result of the “Christ against culture” approach to evangelization by Western missionaries. As Gehman rightly observes, African religions are by their nature utilitarian. Religion and the deities of religion exist to satisfy the demands of humans. Man is at the centre of the universe and everything else exists to ensure that man gains the power he needs to live a “good” life.²⁵ For the African Christian, therefore, to gain the right perspective of Christianity and the Christian God, there would be the need, as Niebuhr suggests, to always balance I John with Romans 13.²⁶ That is, to hold in a delicate balance, the command to separate oneself from the world and the command to submit to all in authority.

The balance of I John and Romans 13 imperatives should result in a combination of Niebuhr’s third and fifth responses to the Christ and culture question where Christ is seen as the very source of culture and therefore, is above it. Nature, the conception on which all culture is built, was created by Christ the Word and so the world that stems out of nature cannot simply be regarded as the realm of godlessness but that in which the Creator has an obligation for the Christian. The Christian’s participation in culture, in this response, is a divine imperative. Christ is the fulfilment of human

²² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 61.

²³ Emilio A. Nunez and William D. Taylor, *Crisis in Latin America: An Evangelical Perspective*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1989), 312.

²⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 79.

²⁵ Richard, J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, (Chicago, IL: Oasis International Ltd.), 52.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 79.

cultural aspirations. Culture in itself is only possible as Christ steps into the human realm from above with gifts and abilities beyond the ordinary human effort.²⁷ Christ is not against culture but uses its best products as instruments in His work of bestowing on men what they cannot achieve by their own efforts²⁸, and because our cultures have been tainted with sin and human errors, as proponents of Niebuhr's fifth response indicate, our cultures must be converted to Christ. This essentially is the task of Christian cultural deconstruction and reconstruction.

Contextualization

For over half a century, African theologians and scholars in related disciplines responded to the problem of African Christianity as a full-grown plant in Western flowerpot and soil, with calls for enculturation or contextualization. The likes of John Mbiti, Idowu, Kwesi Dickson, Okot P' Bitek, Christian Gaba and Kwame Bediako not only beat the drums for the need to place the Gospel within the African context but also danced to the rhythms through their works and in some cases, their practice of the Christian faith. Using elements of the culture, history, contemporary thought forms and experiences of their communities they interpreted the Scriptures in terms familiar to the culture and collective memories of the people. For a better understanding of the Gospel, African contextual theologians made their theologies speak through the context (i.e., the experience of the people). Thus, the diverse historical and cultural events taking place among the people serve as raw materials with human, spiritual and theological implications for the contextual theologian.

On the Roman Catholic front, the emphasis since Vatican II has focused on inculturation, enculturation, or indigenization—the formal adoption of Christian liturgy to the cultures the Catholic Church was working in. The main proponent of enculturation was Pope John Paul II. In a speech at the Foundation of the Pontifical Council for Culture in May 1982, Pope John Paul made his famous declaration that, “A faith which does not become culture is a faith that has not been received, not thoroughly thought through nor fully lived out.”²⁹ To John Paul II, the human drive towards self-realization can only be fully achieved Christocentrically: Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. This points to the fact that the more Christ-centred a culture is, the more human-centred it becomes. Humans as creators of culture, seek to preserve themselves through culture as the mission of the Church in the Gospel—the eternal preservation of humanity. These basic assumptions led to his (Pope John Paul's) development of the idea of the “**evangelization of culture**”—the transformation, of anything which may be in contrast with God's plan for mankind, in any given culture. The ministry of evangelization of persons and cultures became one of the overriding commitments of Pope John II till his death.³⁰

Going beyond the use of African cultural elements to explain Christian doctrines and concepts, some African Biblical scholars are advocating for the adoption of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics (MTBH). As a form of contextualization, the MTBH approach to Biblical interpretation is based on mother-tongue theology expounded by Kwesi Dickson, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako and on Lamin Sanneh's “vernacularization” of the writings on Judeo-Christian Scriptures in Africa.³¹ The chief advocate of the Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics is John Ekem, a Ghanaian Biblical Studies Scholar. Ekem defines Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics as “a discipline devoted to the interpretation and reinterpretation of biblical texts in languages considered by speakers as their first languages into which they were born.”³² As Jonathan Kuwornu-Adjaottor explains, a mother tongue is not the same as a vernacular which is the common language of a region or group. The mother tongue

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 55, 124.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 134.

²⁹ John Paul II, Speech before UNESCO, 7 in Germain McKenzie-Gonzalez, John Paul II's View on Faith and Culture: What Does It Say to Us in Canada Today? <https://www.researchgate.net>, 3. (Accessed 15.05.2022)

³⁰ John Paul II, , Speech before UNESCO, 5.

³¹ John D. K. Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2011), 150.

³² Ekem, *Early Scriptures of the Gold Coast (Ghana)*, 10.

is a person's own native and indigenous language and is very much intertwined with the person's identity. As a repository of indigenous wisdom, knowledge, insight, science, theology and philosophy, it is in the mother tongue that one thinks and dreams, before translating such thoughts into other languages.³³

Essentially, the Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics approach to biblical interpretation is the use of viable tools for the scientific analysis of the phonetic, phonological, morpho-syntactical and semantic components of a mother tongue in the process of interpreting the indigenous language translation of the Bible for the society.³⁴ To arrive at the mother tongue hermeneutics of the Biblical text, the advocates of this form of contextualization recommend the intensive study of the biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek alongside the African language(s) into which the text is to be interpreted. The effort must also include the introduction and development of Septuagint (LXX) and Targum Studies in the Seminaries across the continent. Thus, directing the efforts of Biblical Studies to the indigenous languages of Africa, rather than the colonial languages of English, French or Portuguese as has become the norm.

Following the Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics approach to Bible interpretation, Dorothy Akoto, a Ghanaian theologian replaces the shepherd imagery in the 23rd Psalm with the Ewe Mother or first daughter because the community for which the interpretation is being made is not familiar with sheep and shepherding. Moreover, the Ewe translation of the Psalm does use the shepherd imagery overtly. The referent is *kplola*—leader. Literally, the first line of Psalm 23 reads; “The Lord is my leader, I shall not lack anything”. Ironically, although it is men who are considered leaders among the Ewe, the characteristics of the “loving, tender, protective, providing care of the Good Shepherd of scripture”³⁵ can only be attributed to the Eweor African mother or the first daughter (who normally plays the role of mothers in caring for their younger siblings). And even though it is not all who may have experienced the care of an ideal mother, the imagery would resonate with most people. Hence the appropriateness of replacing the Good Shepherd imagery which makes no sense to the Ewe Christian, with the mother and first daughter imagery to evoke the needed trust in and dependence on the Lord.

The Christian Faith and Socio-Economic Development

Attempts to indigenize the Gospel into the African context in the last fifty or so years have tended to be cosmetic and therefore, have not had the needed impact nor addressed the real needs of the African church. To address the current situation in African Christianity where the end of faith seems largely to be understood as material gain and the God of faith, a utilitarian God, whose main interest is the temporal comfort of the faithful, the Church in Africa needs to deconstruct and reconstruct the current church culture. In addition, as a major religion, the church should be poised to reconstruct elements of traditional cultures to fall in line with the dictates of the Christian Scriptures though anchored on the thoughts, experiences and temporal and eternal aspirations of the people. This will make the Christian faith more relevant and capable of successfully replacing the all-embracing traditional religions of the people. As theological and missiological reflections take into consideration, the apparently mundane issues of life, such as food for the hungry, economic and social justice for the under-trodden, stewardship of God's gifts and talents, concerns for the quality of life of the people and their socio-economic development does not remain addenda to the Christian mandate but a part and parcel of the Mission of God (*Missio Dei*). In the formulation of such a theology, premium ought to be given to

³³ Jonathan, E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor, *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, “Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics: A Current Trend in Biblical Studies in Ghana” (JETERAPS), 3 (4): (575-79), 276. Jeteraps.scholarlinkresearch.org (ISSN:2141-69901) Accessed on 14th Dec.2022.

³⁴ Frederick Mawusi Amevenku, and Isaac Boaheng,, *Biblical Exegesis in African Context*, (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2022), 82.

³⁵ Dorothy, B.E.A. Akoto, *The Bible in Africa*, “The Mother of the Ewe and Firstborn daughter as the “Good Shepherd” in the Cultural Context of the Ewe Peoples: A Liberating Approach”, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 2001), 262.

elements of traditional thought characteristically expressed in the religious or spiritual idiom that might usefully be adapted for development purposes.

An example of a reconstructed cultural idea and its impact is how the doctrine of Calling had direct economic implications for the 16th-century Protestant church in Europe. Calling was understood as what happens to people when they decide to abandon their normal jobs to become priests or serve in any of the Catholic Orders. John Calvin began to teach that every Christian had a calling. According to Weber, the Reformation gave the word *Calling*, a new meaning: the valuation of the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume.³⁶ That basic understanding gave everyday life religious significance as ordinary Christians pursued their daily vocations “as unto the Lord” (Col. 3:17). To date, most Germans culturally hold on to that 16th century understanding of *Berufung* without caring to know the Caller.

In John Calvin’s own words:

... in everything, the call of the Lord is the foundation and beginning of the right actions. He who does not act with reference to it will never, in the discharge of duty, keep the right path... and besides, there will be no harmony in the different parts of his life. ... in following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have a splendor and value in the eye of God.³⁷

In the same way, certain words, symbols, and cultural elements can be given new meanings and Biblical interpretations to effect change for development in Africa.

Cultural Deconstruction and Reconstruction

In spite of our numbers, contextualized theologies and levels of enthusiasm, there are many questions the faithful in the African church continue to ask that the available theologies have no answers to. An incident occurred recently in Ho, the capital town of the Volta Region of Ghana, where thunder struck a young Christian girl to death and it took a fetish priest of the *Yewe* cult in the community to perform some rituals and remove the body for burial. Because the church has no theological reflections on the phenomenon, it took a traditional religious practitioner whose “theology” provides meaning and therefore, remedy to the phenomenon of thunder and its effects on the community to lead the people in response.

‘Deconstruction’ here means a conscious meticulous and critical appraisal of aspects of both African and Church culture that has been garnished with Western culture and secularism in light of Scripture. These must include the architectural designs of places of worship, the hymns and songs of worship, days of worship, liturgies, symbols of worship, ecclesiastical structures and politics. In the words of Gehman:

The African Christian church must think creatively of ways and times when God’s people should worship. The Murle of Sudan were never taught that worship is for Sunday only. Thus the Murle Christians meet and sing every night when in camp. Traditionally, special prayers were said during times of planting, harvesting, hunting and fishing; and during the transitions of life—puberty marriage, childbirth and death. The Christian church needs to relate the gospel to this African traditional religiosity.³⁸

African traditional life abounds with cultural artefacts, historical experiences, and aspirations that can serve as raw materials for reconstructed theological reflections that give credence to belief forms, value systems, rituals, and everyday practical living to which the unchanging truth of Scripture can be applied in response to the peoples’ particular needs.³⁹

³⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (London: Routledge Classics, 2005), 5.

³⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 3.10.6.

³⁸ Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 342.

³⁹ Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 13.

As the gap between rich and poor countries nations continue to increase, the realization that technology does not necessarily bring with it humanization, and the growing awareness among men and women everywhere that they should share the responsibility for shaping the world, make it imperative for the Church to focus its missionary endeavors on integral human development.⁴⁰

As the divine agency for the fulfilment of the Cultural Mandate, Dunn's call on the church to be directly involved with the development of the individuals and the people it encounters is very appropriate. If the Gospel aims to form a new humanity out of the fallen one, then the church's mission on earth must be redefined to embrace development, and for the *Missio Dei* to incorporate development in the African context, it must be based on *phuhla*— the Soseho term for the emergence or the coming out of that which is innate to an idea.⁴¹ Cultural reconstruction in the African context must, in the first place, aim at the removal of the chasm between the sacred and secular as exists in contemporary African Christianity. With that done, Christianity will assume its rightful place within the African milieu where religion was all-embracing and permeated every faculty of life, thus, making room for the rightful use of African traditional and religious ideas, symbols and verbal forms for the reconstruction of cultural forms that seek to bring out the full potential of the African personhood. As Gehman suggests "there are many areas where the Christian church may use the traditional culture for the glory of God."⁴² The development of *phuhla* as the mission of the church should aim at the creation of the necessary environment for the realization of the innate potential in each person, group of persons and their physical environment. *Phuhla* as the mission of the church will ensure that besides the salvation of the individual, his culture is also targeted for conversion.

CONCLUSION

The explosion of Christianity on the African continent has not come as a surprise. The writing has long been on the wall. The surprise, however, is the extent to which the faith has failed in transforming the lives of the several millions of adherents on the continent. The faith does not seem to give meaning to many aspects of the people's lives nor provide answers to the gnawing questions with regard to critical facets of their lives as against the provisions of the traditional religions. In attempts to redress these and the many other issues confronting the church, Africa, theologians have resorted to contextualization in various forms to no avail. In this essay, the authors have isolated one of the causes of the state and nature of the current African church as the mode of evangelization. They have, therefore, proposed the use of radical cultural deconstruction in the church as means of isolating the seed of the Gospel from its inherent Western culture and radical reconstruction on the bases of *phuhla* to provide an authentic African soil for the seed of the Gospel to flourish for the development of the individual, church and community at large.

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⁴⁰ Dunn, *Missionary Theology: Foundations in Development*, 2.

⁴¹ See Komi Hiagbe, "The Church and Sustainable Development in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Vol.41 No. 2 (2015). 164-179. I have redefined development as *Phuhla* in this paper with the understanding that what every society needs for its development is embedded in its environment, including its culture.

⁴² Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, 341.

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