



Inducting the Socratic Method of Forming Faith in African Contexts

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ABSTRACT

The Socratic method of questioning and answering as a learning and teaching strategy has been used widely over time, for it effectively stimulates meaningful learning. Its learner-centered and transformative nature promotes ongoing dialogue. Since cultural differences influence the nature of questions asked, induction of the Socratic method is inevitable so that faith formation leads to thinking theologically where faith becomes a contextual form of thinking and thinking a form of contextualized faith. Some mainline churches in Africa have adopted catechisms with pre-asked and pre-answered questions formulated in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The challenges of time, culture, and geographical contextual differences create a gap between the church's faith formation and context-based spiritual quests. These gaps demand asking the right questions that challenge and inverse wrong attitudes that foster deep reflective self-evaluation, interpretation, and understanding, shaping appropriate perceptions to address the contemporary spiritual quests of Africa. Using the qualitative literature review methodology, this article discovered that there are some gaps between questions and answers in catechisms used in mainline churches and contemporary spiritual quests of Africa. This article aims to discuss the means of closing the gap between questions and answers in catechism and context-based spiritual quests. It recommends induction of the Socratic method so that the questions and answers in catechisms are contextual, communicable, assimilable, and appropriate in African contexts. This study contributes to faith formation by recommending the induction of the Socratic method so that the questions and answers in catechisms are contextual, communicable, assimilable, and appropriate in African contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The Christian life is lived as an ongoing session of questions and answers because believers attempt to relate the learned content of faith to their contexts. Meanwhile, most mainline Churches in Africa have adopted catechisms with pre-asked and pre-answered questions formulated in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. These pre-asked questions arose from the then contextual spiritual concerns affecting the practice of faith, image, and service of the Church. The answers in the catechism

were theological guidelines or responses to the spiritual and social concerns of the Church. The challenge is; How can these questions and answers still speak to the spiritual quests of Christians in the present African countries that struggle with issues of poverty, the meaningful shift from African traditional religious (ATR) beliefs to the Christian faith, ecological degradation, corruption, and growing democracy among others? This challenge is further confounded by the fact that humans are by nature endlessly curious beings who delve into the unknown and attempt to assimilate it into the known. People, regardless of their faith affiliation, ask, answer and re-ask as they develop new questions in challenges that foster a relook at the present theological answers. The shift in geographic and time location provokes new questions of faith in need of tailor-made responses. Therefore, the process of questioning and answering in the Christian faith is an endless cycle. All issues, with unanswered questions either at a personal or social level, are likely to cause a gap between content and the practice of faith.¹ This may demand deeper and inductive reflective questions that deepen faith.

Contexts-Texts Gaps

Aridas upon observing the gap between the church's faith formation and context-based spiritual quests critically asks; are we as a "church asking the right questions?"² This gap is created because congregants continue to ask new questions that require new theological responses, as they seek to understand God and attempt to relate the upheld faith to context. This suggests that questions for forming faith asked in catechism should respond to context-based spiritual quests. Of course, this does not suggest the ignoring of historical European-formulated catechism but maintaining a healthy tension between inculturation and interculturalization of faith. To keep this tension in balance, the local Church must not be too local to sever universal connectivity and should also avoid being too universal-oriented that it loses touch with local realities.³

The interculturalization in this article is discussed in terms of present cultural diversity and intergenerational, including the past and future. It is on the basis of interculturalization that 16th-18th century European compiled catechisms remain important faith formation texts for the contemporary Church in Africa. Through such catechisms, the current local church in Africa is linked and benefits from its Catholicity in historical and cultural diversity. The phrase 'local church' is discussed with geographic and time location in mind. Due to its intergenerational nature, the Church's learning web is expanded beyond the existing membership as it includes past generations. Accumulative theological developments in history form a good basis for responding to new context-based questions of faith. Questions and answers in catechisms have to be interpreted and inducted in contemporary contexts.

The historical, social-political, geographical, and economic chasms between the contexts of catechism formulation and the current contexts are the reasons why the right questions for contemporary Africa should be asked. Put differently, there is a need to interpret the answers and questions in catechisms so that the historically accumulated theological wealth continues to enrich the church in Africa. This involves questioning and probing for deeper understanding. Where necessary, Africa can add its questions and answers in response to its spiritual quests. Barth, in objection to one worldwide confession of faith, argues that confessions of faith are spontaneously and publicly formulated statements for a particular time and place by a particular Christian community as a way of witnessing Jesus Christ. This attestation to Jesus Christ is received through the Word by the Spirit in times and circumstances as responses to questions arising from particular conditions and crises.⁴ Therefore, asking the right questions in contexts is a way of creating faith-forming theology from below, which serves as orientation in confusion, public account of convictions and commitments, as well as guidance for the life of the Christian community.⁵

¹ M Moyo and K J Pali, "Faith Formation in the Tension Interplay of Tools, Processes and the Course for Social Transformation," *Acta Theologica* 43, no. 2 (2023): 169.

² C. Aridas, *The Faith Formation of Children, Are We Asking the Right Questions* (New York: National Pastoral Life Centre, 2021), 1.

³ D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll. New York: Orbis Books, 1991).385,387,423

⁴ Dirk J Smit, "Confessing Church Today?," *Acta Theologica* 43, no. 1 (2023): 195

⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 423; Smit, "Confessing Church Today?"195.

Use of questions and answers in the pre-Christ era

The initial use of questions and answers (Socratic method) as a method of formation is historically traced to Socrates, the Greek philosopher of Athens who lived between 469-399 BC. The method has been developed from the time of Socrates up to date. Socrates himself used it to attain an adequate understanding of basic principles. He believed that quality thinking and self-improvement take place through increased understanding.⁶ The increased understanding was considered to arise from the quality of the questions asked. Quality questions were also assumed to have the ability to bring about self-examination and continued deeper reflection on one's current understanding. Questions are asked to guide the learner towards the birth of new and better understanding, ideas, or definitions just as midwifery facilitates the process of bearing a baby.

During Plato, who is believed to have been Socrates' student, the use of the method developed from being the means for merely understanding basic principles and improving definitions or ideas to a guide for learners to go deeper and generate specific knowledge on the issue under reflection. Critical thinking was considered to be questioning one's own upheld idea.⁷ This means that the answers, ideas, and beliefs in the questions were not final because questioning is ongoing. With an understanding that God is transcendental, the Church must continue asking questions for continuous learning and deepening of faith. Questions are used to guide not only continued growth in theological knowledge and understanding but also better practice of faith. The Socratic method these days, is used pedagogically as a student-centred and transformative mode of teaching. It is used to promote mutual respectful dialogue between the teacher and the learner where both learn from and teach each other.

Jesus' use of questions and answers in the parable of the Good Samaritan

In biblical times, questions and answers were used as one of the methods of informing, forming, reforming, transforming, and deepening faith in God. Questions, apart from calling for deeper reflection, also facilitated transitions from misunderstanding to clear understanding. The Bible, especially the letters and epistles, was authored as theological responses to actual life experiences encountered by the Church in the process of its practice of faith. These questions were asked as an inquiry into understanding what it means to have faith in God in particular contexts.⁸ The responses to these questions challenged, supported, and strengthened the faith of the Church in its desire to improve its praxis in dialogue with contexts. The use of questions and answers in the Bible shows that the relationship with God is more of a dialogue than a monologue.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) provides an example of how questions and answers can effectively shape the dialogue for the formation of faith. The dialogue is initiated by the lawyer whose intention is to test Jesus. The lawyer's initial approach to Jesus shows that people come with various intentions, attitudes, assumptions, and worldviews that need to be supported, awakened, or challenged in the process of faith formation.⁹ The questions in the parable of the Good Samaritan and its context perform the following functions:

a. Challenges upheld assumptions

The parable is sandwiched between two questions. The first one is; "Who is my neighbour?" (v29), asked by the lawyer in his effort to justify himself. The attempted self-justification is based on the assumed concept of discriminatory neighbourliness in the built-in clustered around interest groups while closing out the "other than class". The phrase "other than class" in this article is used to show a negative neighbourliness that segregates people based on religion, denomination, social class, financial, mental, cultural borders, race, gender, etc. One of the hindrances to true neighbourliness is despising others or self-despising against a perceived class of people. The second question is; "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a

⁶ Haris Delić and Senad Bećirović, "Socratic Method as an Approach to Teaching," *European Researcher. Series A*, no. 10 (2016): 513.

⁷ Delić and Bećirović, "Socratic Method as an Approach to Teaching." 513.

⁸ M. Moyo, "Christian Faith Formation and Culture: A Theological Study of the Nsenga People" (University of the Free State, 2023).128

⁹ Richard Robert Osmer, *Teaching for Faith: A Guide for Teachers of Adult Classes* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). 15.

neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” asked by Jesus in verse 36. The question after the parable demands a critical analysis of the upheld assumptions of limiting neighbourliness to blood relationships, geographical proximity, cultural connection, or religious affiliations.¹⁰

b. *Inverse assumptions and attitudes of self-justification*

The parable subverts existing ethics, for it demands the extension of care and goodwill to persons outside the defined circle of relationships. Reflection on the question; “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” in view of the parable, inverts assumptions and attitudes of self-justification hindering the true view of neighbourliness. Questions asked in faith formation tools must not only intend to challenge but also invert assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs hindering authentic relationships with God, fellow human beings, the natural environment, and the self.¹¹

c. *Leads to shifting from self-justification to self-evaluation*

Relating the first question “Who is my neighbour?” in verse 29 asked by the lawyer to Jesus’ question in verse 36 “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (NIV) in the context of the parable, is a critical call to shift from self-justification to self-evaluation. The quest to test Jesus suddenly turned into a moment of critical self-examination. Questions in catechisms should draw the catechumen to a critical self-view and evaluation in the process and after a catechetical session. It is through questioning for self-evaluation that movement and growth towards being a new creation in Christ is possible.

d. *Leads to deep reflection, interpretation and understanding*

The dialogue between the lawyer and Jesus in the context of the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25-37) stands as an example of continued constructive reflection and exploration for forming a meaningful faith which makes a personal and social positive difference. The lawyer asked Jesus “Who is my neighbour?” as an inquiry into how far the determining boundaries of inclusiveness or exclusiveness can go. The question Jesus asks of who among the Levites, Priest, and Samaritans was the neighbour to the unidentified victim beaten and left half dead by robbers led the lawyer to explore possibilities of actualizing the new concept of neighbourliness. The parable is also against a faith that neglects the needs at hand.

The parable itself is full of intentional shocks and surprises meant to create points of reflection for the hearers. For example, the lawyer asks the identity-demanding question, “Who is my neighbour?” but Jesus presents a victim without identity. The parable narration leads to perception adjustments because it intentionally instigates deeper reflection and interpretation to deepen the understanding of the meaning of neighbourliness. Jesus asks guiding and reflective questions that lead the lawyer to a correct understanding of true neighbourliness. It is vital to assess if the pre-set questions and answers in catechisms used by mainline churches lead to deep reflection, interpretation, and understanding of the essence of the Christian faith in African contexts. Faith formation intentionally provokes deep reflection and interpretation as a means of deepening understanding of one’s relationship with God and the world.

e. *Empowers appropriate response to the gospel*

Jesus’ declaration that “go and do likewise” shows that the conversation was not simply a verbal exercise not related to practical life. It aimed at practical implementation in real socio-cultural life regardless of its varied opinions on neighbourliness. Passing through catechetical training should end in a charge to go and make a practical social difference even in communities

¹⁰ Matthew Michael, “Border-Crossing and the Samaritan Traveller: The Crossing of Borders in the Parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ (Lk 10: 25–37),” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 5, no. 3 (2019): 444.

¹¹ Sondra Higgins Mattheai, “Rethinking Faith Formation,” *Religious Education* 99, no. 1 (2004): 58.

with adverse perceptions. Therefore, after reflective questions and answers, as part of the faith formation process, a chance must be provided for the appropriate response to the gospel.

Question and answer as an approach to faith formation in African contexts

Africa has shared many things with the world such as COVID-19, the AIDS pandemic, the effects of the Russia-Ukraine war, etc. However, Africa had and still has its own experiences which led to unique spiritual quests. Among others, contextualization aims at enabling the Christian faith to speak to the spiritual quests of the Church in Africa. The spiritual quests of contemporary Africa, among others, revolve around the struggle against poverty, a meaningful shift from African traditional religious beliefs to the Christian faith, ecological degradation, corruption, and growing democracy. The claim by Olorunnisola, that the Church in Africa is struggling to convert the shift of Christian numerical gravitation to the southern part of the globe into a force for social transformation by “offering complementary or supplementary approaches, and alternative solutions, to the very complex issues facing society today” should be a source of concern.¹² Boesak suggested the need for the restoration of the enfeebled public conscience for the actualization of the African Renaissance.¹³ This must be extended to the restoration of African Christian conscience, spirituality, and praxis to convert numerical gravitation shifts to the southern part of the globe into a force for social transformation. The process of restoration demands a critical relook at the initial faith-forming questions.

Partridge et al. assert that the primary goal of faith formation is raising peculiar people with a relationship with God who desire to grow in expressing it. They also assume that crafting quality questioning techniques which lead learners to actively participate in their learning, explore their place in God’s world, and have opportunities to respond with the head, heart, and hands plays a pivotal role in the formation of faith.¹⁴ Through good questioning techniques in faith formation, the process of learning gives learners an opportunity to actively seek and live out the relationship with God among his creation.

Seeking to position oneself in the God-given place in the world is the cause for faith to be formed by continuously asking and answering the right questions. For the relationship to be expressed meaningfully daily, life is lived by endless questioning and answering. Hubick claims that humans think in the mode of questions and answers.¹⁵ Thinking in questions opens possibilities for constant exploration and expansion of concepts. Meanwhile, thinking in answers actualizes ideas by structuring and stabilizing the content of the concept. Thinking is therefore done as a continuous interplay exploration of possibilities and actualization. This means that even answers are questioned. As answers are questioned, faith formation processes remain open to further reflection, exploration, and reformation. In Christianity, it translates into theological thinking where faith becomes a contextual form of thinking and thinking a form of contextualized faith.¹⁶

Partridge et al, suggest that the questions asked should be deep. They are called deep because they lead to focused and purposeful inquiry with the ability to engage learners by raising their curiosity about resourcefulness and being active meaning-makers in various situations.¹⁷ This means that deep questions invite learners to focused reflections on issues under discussion not only to master the content of faith but also to grow in practicing it. Christian faith is informed, formed, reformed, and deepened by responses to questions arising from practical life situations. Linking faith to contexts grows with continued learning through asking, answering, and re-asking questions about God and his word. Technically good questions are critical in the process of investigating and gaining a life-

¹² Titus Olorunnisola, “The Church in Conversation for Social Transformation: From Christology to Christo-Praxis,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 3, no. 2 (2015): 60, 72.

¹³ A. Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2005).214.

¹⁴ Fiona Partridge and Emily Brookes, “Reimagining Quality Questioning: Forming Hearts and Minds toward the Kingdom,” *Christian Teachers Journal* 27, no. 4 (2019): 11.

¹⁵ Joel Hubick, “Our Openness to Religious Phenomena: Thinking in Questions as a Way to Understand Possibility,” *ET-Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 341–49, 344.

¹⁶ John D Caputo, “Thinking with Faith, Thinking as Faith: What Comes After Onto-Theo-Logy?,” *Open Theology* 8, no. 1 (2022): 237; John W De Gruchy, *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*, vol. 1 (Orbis Books, 1994).2.

¹⁷ Partridge and Brookes, “Reimagining Quality Questioning: Forming Hearts and Minds toward the Kingdom.” 9-11.

transforming understanding of meaningful contributions to the environmental and social well-being of Africa and Africans.

Asking the right faith forming questions

Keith claims that asking “the right questions” is “at the heart of effective communications and information exchange” (Critical Thinking Handbook). Asking the right questions in particular contexts improves the effectiveness of informing, forming, reforming and transforming faith. This is so since questions are critical in creating inviting environments, structuring, acquiring, processing, understanding, assimilating and embodying the content of faith. They provoke thoughts, demand solutions, awaken memories, enthuse the mind with discoveries, make learning memorable and urge for new knowledge in new answers. The human natural desire for new knowledge in new experiences makes questions and answers vital means of faith formation. The term ‘right questions’ suggests that there are possibilities to ask wrong questions. This should lead to the question: What qualifies questions to be right?

There is a need to clarify that the phrase ‘wrong questions’ does not necessarily mean that the questions asked are theologically incorrect. Certain questions can be theologically right but inappropriate to the context. Right questions are appropriate and facilitate meaningful and formative dialogue in context. They are more than a means of exchanging information because of their formative nature. This means that the right questions in the process of faith formation should lead to God-centred responses to the spiritual quest of the African people in their contexts forming godly perspectives, world views and attitudes for the transformation of the whole personality of the person. Faith as a living and thinking thing whose thoughts “are not driven by answers but questions, needs to ask the right questions in the process of its formation” (Keith Critical Thinking Handbook).

The answers to the questions asked form part of understanding. Mzumara claims that understanding grows in proportion to the quality of responses to the right questions asked.¹⁸ According to Partridge et al., the refined quality of questioning and the art of dialogue can better invite learners into authentic and deeper learning opportunities of biblical concepts about God and the world.¹⁹ Questions are infinite learning tools as curious minds keep on enquiring even from new findings. The art of asking the right questions forms the core of significant inquiry toward growth in information, understanding, formation, reformation, and transformation.²⁰ Growth in understanding is endless because new questions of faith continue to arise from the newly found answers. The continued perfection of faith and its practice is an ongoing task and its formation involves a continuous dialogical task of questioning and answering in the process of reflecting on God, scripture and Church tradition in conversation with particular contexts.

Good faith forming questioning technique

Though the question-and-answer method is very effective in the faith-forming process, its effectiveness largely depends on good questioning techniques or skills. Asking the right questions goes hand in hand with good questioning techniques.²¹ Put the other way around, the right questions can lose their effectiveness due to insufficient good questioning techniques. Hou speaks of inferential questions, which intend to elicit and interpret information.²² Six types of questions are identified; questions that demand clarification, probe assumptions, relook at reasoning/evidence, and perspective, which consider implications and questions about the question. The questions are further classified into two categories. The first is low-order questions which are factual, probing and convergent. The second

¹⁸ P. Mzumara, *Lecture Notes General Teaching Methodology* (Lusaka: Justo Mwale University, 2016).

¹⁹ Partridge and Brookes, “Reimagining Quality Questioning: Forming Hearts and Minds toward the Kingdom.” 9.

²⁰ Mzumara, *Lecture Notes General Teaching Methodology*.

²¹ Moyo, “Christian Faith Formation and Culture: A Theological Study of the Nsenga People.” 129.

²² Yen-ju Hou, “Employing Questioning to Cultivate Critical Thinking Dispositions and Attitudes toward Questioning: A Case Study with Taiwanese EFL Students,” *The International Journal of Pedagogy and Curriculum* 26, no. 2 (2019): 2.

is high-order questions foster transformation and application invoking evaluation, inference and comparisons.²³

Technically good questions challenge, engage, stimulate reflective discussion, encourage exploration and refine understanding of God and others. This skill in faith formation boosts meaningful reflection on God, self, and others with the aim of growing in understanding the significance of these relationships in contexts. These questions encourage ‘bottom-up’ approach for they are constructed from the learners’ perspective by taking time to know their backgrounds, life experiences, quests, abilities, weaknesses, and strengths.²⁴ The ‘bottom-up’ rather than ‘top-bottom’ way of doing theology suggests that the Socratic method works better in an inductive way rather than in a deductive way. The current approach of coming up with fixed and inflexible questions and answers used in African mainline Churches is to be assessed if it addresses Africa’s faith-contending issues such as corruption, environmental degradation, etc. Therefore, for the Church to continue growing in addressing Africa’s theological quests in various contexts, an ongoing re-question and re-answering as well as reforming the faith-forming content, processes, and methodologies are recommended.

Questions and answers are not only vital means of formation but also for monitoring the deepening of faith and evaluating the effectiveness of Christian formation contents and processes. Monitoring the congruence between the progression in conducting faith forming programmes and competences in actualizing of its aims and objectives is constantly checked. The quality of the answers provided reveals the level of knowledge, understanding, and application competencies. The indicators of successful formation after passing through faith-forming processes are more than verbal, as they include the way life is lived in totality. Facilitators of faith formation are to confidently lead learners to explore and engage the richness, the intriguing, and the mystery of God and his world, including its brokenness.²⁵ Questioning can be used for assessing pre-knowledge, stimulating interest in the topic, problem-posing, or problem-solving.²⁶ Apart from promoting an open text-reader dialogue, questions question existing concepts propagated in the texts. Open dialogue provides learners opportunities to verbalise internal questions arising from their interaction with new concepts where misconceptions are corrected and understanding is reinforced.

Since learners differ in their rate of understanding, observing responses to the questions and the questions they ask gives a chance to re-strategize the faith formation approach. In this case, questions and answers should not be one-sided but from catechisms and learners. Questions help both learners and the church so that it improvises clearer demonstrations by launching fresh investigations and research on means of faith formation. Questions may also encourage learners to research and reflect more on the issue of concern on their own. The question-and-answer method creates a good transition from pre- to new understanding because it serves reflective and evaluative points of learners through its nature of provoking new thoughts. Ultimately, though not final, but subject to constant review, the new answers found during reflection become part of new knowledge and understanding.

Inducting the questions and answers

Mainline churches use questions and answers to form their members’ faith. The difference in the contexts of the formation of catechism and learners’ contexts calls for the need to assess how right and technically good the questions asked are in engaging African contexts. It is equally vital to assess whether the provided answers adequately respond to the theological quests of Africans. The inductiveness of the questions and answers aims to determine if the catechisms meet the spiritual quests of Africa and Africans. It also looks at the practicability, contextuality, communicability, and assimilability of the questions and answers in catechisms.

Inductive faith-forming questions and answers challenge the upheld assumptions, inverse assumptions, and attitudes of self-justification, leading to Holy Spirit-inspired self-evaluation, deep reflection, interpretation, and understanding. It is also anticipated to provide a chance for a practical

²³ Hou, “Employing Questioning to Cultivate Critical Thinking Dispositions and Attitudes toward Questioning: A Case Study with Taiwanese EFL Students.”

²⁴ Mzumara, *Lecture Notes General Teaching Methodology*.

²⁵ Partridge and Brookes, “Reimagining Quality Questioning: Forming Hearts and Minds toward the Kingdom.”11.

²⁶ T. Dreeckmeier, *Educative Teaching* (Pretoria: CcE Books, 2005).113.

right response to the gospel. To ascertain the inductivity of questions and answers, and their ability to challenge, engage, stimulate discussion, encourage explorations, and refine the understanding of the Christian faith, this article suggests a constant assessment in the light of the spiritual quests, appropriateness, contextuality, communicability and assimilability in African contexts as discussed below:

a. Contextual spiritual quests versus catechetical questions

Just as from its inception, the Church is still called to witness to an evolving world with its diverse contexts. The effectiveness of the Church's witness starts with a greater understanding of the world and the need to ensure that social transformation occurs.²⁷ The kind of questions asked by people such as Aridas "Are we asking the right questions?"²⁸ raise concern if the Church's faith-forming methodology engages people in contributing to social transformation. This seems to indicate that the texts and means of faith formation are not compatible enough to make a Christo-centric difference in contemporary contexts.

Witnessing to a changing Africa requires that the Church be as contextual as possible to the hybrid kind of culture and circumstantial shifts. Each context is likely to induce new theological quests demanding a re-examination of the already existing questions and answers enshrined in the catechisms. The church in Africa is anticipated to frequently assess if the kinds of questions and answers in faith formation texts correlate with the spiritual questions of Africans. This is significant because the text-context gap is likely to dichotomize the practice of faith, especially in situations where human well-being seems to be under threat.

Conradie distinguishes the theological quests and framework of the West from that of Africa.²⁹ This entails that both Africa and the West ask theological questions to live in a meaningful relationship with the triune God. Both Africans and those in the West are inquisitive about their faith though drivers of the quest their differ. Forster states that Africans constantly strive for conditions of health, balance, harmony, order, and continuity.³⁰ Conradie suggests that the key theological quest for the West is: 'How can I be made right with God?'³¹ With the issue of the right way of relating to God being the key theological quest, he suggests that means of justification and sanctification became the main theme for the West. Meanwhile, Africa's theological quests are mainly driven by the desire to experience wholeness and harmonious co-existence of the living, dead, nature, spirits, and the Supreme Being.³² Africa's spiritual questions of life revolve around what Kalilombe refers to as "harmonized interrelatedness."³³

Conradie argues that Africans' spiritual quest focuses more on harmony than the right relationship with God.³⁴ This implies that faith formation texts and processes in Africa must strive to harmonize relationships with God, self, others, and the environment. The uniqueness of the West and Africans' spiritual quests is in the questions "How to be right with God?" and 'How to live in a harmonious relationship with God, others, and self?'. This difference suggests the need for more of a theology from below which addresses Africa's unique spiritual quest for harmonized relationships with God and his creation for congruency of confession of the Christian faith to praxis. The variance of the contextual spiritual quest from theology in the

²⁷ Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*.73.

²⁸ Aridas, *The Faith Formation of Children, Are We Asking the Right Questions*.

²⁹ Sas Conradie, "Towards Transformational Theology and Theological Education in Africa: Collection of Outlines of Presentations and Reports during 2020 Webinars on Theological Education in Africa," 2020, <https://acteaweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Towards-Transformational-Theology-booklet.pdf>. 121.

³⁰ Dion A Forster, "African Relational Ontology, Individual Identity, and Christian Theology: An African Theological Contribution towards an Integrated Relational Ontological Identity," *Theology* 113, no. 874 (2010): 250.

³¹ Conradie, "Towards Transformational Theology and Theological Education in Africa: Collection of Outlines of Presentations and Reports during 2020 Webinars on Theological Education in Africa."121.

³² Conradie, "Towards Transformational Theology and Theological Education in Africa: Collection of Outlines of Presentations and Reports during 2020 Webinars on Theological Education in Africa,"121

³³ P.A. Kalilombe, "Spirituality in the African Perspective," in *Path of African Theology*, ed. R. Gibellini (Orbits, 1994), 122.

³⁴ Conradie, "Towards Transformational Theology and Theological Education in Africa: Collection of Outlines of Presentations and Reports during 2020 Webinars on Theological Education in Africa,"122.

faith formation texts creates gaps between confession and practical life. Therefore, there is a need to assess whether the questions in faith-forming texts or processes address the actual spiritual quests of Africans in their respective contexts.

b. Appropriateness of the answers

Conradie speaks of broken theology defined as a neglect of essential aspects of human beings and their existence.³⁵ Appropriateness assesses if answers to the questions in catechisms address essential spiritual quests of Christians in Africa.³⁶ This means that although the questions may correlate with Africans' spiritual quest, the answers must reciprocate accordingly. The difference between answers to the questions and spiritual quests in the African context can possibly cause a theological breakdown as learners attempt to apply the learned contents of the faith. This highlights the important of inquiring if responses for forming faith exhibit a broken theology by neglecting essential aspects for total wellbeing. The church needs to assess how holistic its formation of faith is in terms of improving life in all its endeavours.

Since cultures influence the nature of the spiritual quest, so are the answers. These spiritual quests demand contextual theological responses. The article proposes equipping of individual congregants with abilities to handle contextual spiritual quests. This is proposed with the view that spiritual maturity is evident when congregants, individually and socially are in a position to discern spiritual direction among challenging contexts. Such discernment can only occur if the spiritual quests are theologically addressed competently.

For example, Boesak identifies restoration of the enfeebled public consciences as one of the quests for rebuilding the African renaissance in post-apartheid South Africa. He links conscience to being aware that the sovereignty of the triune God permeates every sphere of life in the whole world.³⁷ Chuka further alleged that the formation of a Christian conscience is required in Africa amid the challenges of appropriating and applying Christ-rooted values in ever-changing historical and cultural situations.³⁸ Paul links faith to conscience as he urges Timothy to hold on to faith and a good conscience (1 Timothy 1:5 & 9). This suggests that faith formation should also be the formation of a Christian conscience.

Answers to the questions in catechism are expected to respond to spiritual quests and form a faith that listens and relies on the guidance of the Holy Spirit for exercising a good conscience. The link of faith to conscience is likely to eliminate the major challenges of abuse of public offices, corruption, and practical incongruencies among Christians. Boesak defines conscience as the integrity of the heart with a sense of God's justice as an additional witness.³⁹ In order to address the problem of Christian conscience as one of the spiritual quests for the African Church, answers to the questions in catechism empower congregants with a Christocentric praxis out of reverence for the omniscient and omnipresent God so that Christian faith becomes a personal and social life-transforming force. The ill-formed faith lacks a good conscience and leads to a compartmentalistic approach to life where people are Christians during Sunday services and live otherwise the rest of the week. Conscience formation enables the church to seek the glory of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life with world-engaging and transforming faith in changing historical and cultural situations. It presupposes that if faith is well-formed, Christian conscience is also well-formed, then congregants' life in its entirety will be lived wholeheartedly for God at all times. Appropriate answers to the questions in catechism form a faith with a good Christian conscience so that life is lived holistically for God.

³⁵ Conradie, "Towards Transformational Theology and Theological Education in Africa: Collection of Outlines of Presentations and Reports during 2020 Webinars on Theological Education in Africa," 121.

³⁶ Moyo, "Christian Faith Formation and Culture: A Theological Study of the Nsenga People," 132.

³⁷ Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*. 214.

³⁸ Aghamelu Fidelis Chuka, "Formation of Christian Conscience for the Common Good in Nigerian Politics," *UNIZIK Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 10, no. 1 (2018): 103.

³⁹ Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics*. 214.

c. Contextuality of catechism

The basis for assessing the effectiveness of the questions and answers in catechisms is changes in historical and cultural contexts. The church is challenged to continuously ensure that questions and answers in catechisms formulated in Europe from the 15th to 18th centuries meet the current spiritual quests of the Church in Africa regardless of the historical and situational gap. Moreover, with a lot of changes in terms of globalization, theological studies, and a hybrid of cultures and technology, it is necessary to ensure that the catechisms as the faith formation texts address the spiritual quest of African people in their respective contexts. If not, then the whole process of forming faith becomes ineffective, due to the gap between the contents of catechism and contextual spiritual quests. In order to close the catechism-context gap interpretation of the pre-asked and pre-answered questions for addressing spiritual quests of the Africans is a necessity. There is a need to extensively consider whether faith formation texts and processes are contextual enough to represent and respond to the spiritual quest of congregants. This raises the question: How can faith-forming questions and answers in the Catechism inspire reflection on the spiritual quest for the transformation of African societies? African mainline have the mandate to ensure that the pre-set fixed questions and answers in catechisms are contextualized.

On culture as a context, this article admits that some denominations spread over diverse cultures with similarities and distinguishing uniqueness. Over-emphasis on similarities while neglecting the uniqueness of each culture leads to neglect of the unique spiritual quests of the ethnic group. Meanwhile, over-emphasis on uniqueness fragments the church into cultural territorials. Contextuality implies that faith formation is contextualized in the local church while maintaining its global connection. It is inevitable to assess the possibility of questions and answers in catechisms to balance the unique spiritual quest in the cultural context of the local church while maintaining its catholicity.

d. Communicability and assimilability

The goal of communicating faith contents through questions and answers is to ensure that the Christian faith is assimilated. The term assimilability is borrowed from the biological view of assimilation. In the digestion system, assimilation involves the absorption of nutrients from food particles, converting nutrients into usable vitamins, minerals, and chemicals, and transporting them to body cells. In this article, assimilability stresses absorbing and converting faith into a workable practical life of the kingdom of God in respective contexts. The content of faith must be usable in the daily lived experience as the good news of God's salvation in Christ and the demonstration of the power of his love to redeem mankind from evil is embodied in the social systems of Africa. The Church has to make sure that the questions and answers are able to communicate the gospel in such a way that it is domesticated, integrated, and usable as part of the individual and social systems in Africa.

For Africans to assimilate the gospel, ways of communication should be treated as significant as the message because receptors construct meaning by interpreting the received information through their deeply embedded conceptual systems. As a way of avoiding misinterpretations or distortions, the sender of the message must convey it with the receptors' conceptual systems in mind. The purpose of communication is achieved if the receptor constructs the meaning as intended by the communicator.⁴⁰ Processes and texts of faith formation as message bearers have to be on point in their transmission by considering conceptual system of the Africans so that the meaning of the message is clearly grasped, correctly interpreted, and practiced in contexts.

Contents of faith formation should be communicated in such a way that faith is assimilated and interpreted, and its contents are reflected upon for creating responses that will transform Africa by addressing its social challenges. If Christians in Africa do not assimilate

⁴⁰ C. H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Orbit Books, 2005).115-116.

the faith, then dualism is inevitable. Assimilability addresses the issue of dualism as faith formation facilitates facets of knowing, doing, and being a Christian as modelled by Jesus Christ.⁴¹ The word ‘being’ in this article suggests that Christians need to become what is communicated about their faith.

CONCLUSION

The Socratic method, whose initial use is attributed to Socrates, the Greek philosopher of Athens who lived between 469 BC and 399 BC, has been used for some time now. Induction of the Socratic method in mainline churches’ catechisms is requisite for embodying and practicing the Christian faith in African contexts. If well used, it can inverse assumptions by challenging upheld beliefs, and attitudes of self-justification, leading to self-evaluation, deeper reflection, interpretation, and transformation of spirituality. It also provides a chance for an appropriate response to the gospel. Inductive question and answer as an approach to faith formation in catechisms must speak to the contextual spiritual quests of the people, and enhance the relevant practice of faith in cultural contexts. Questions and answers must consider African conceptual systems so that it is correctly interpreted for assimilation of the life and ministry Christ modelled while on earth. Inducting the catechetical questions and answers is about communicating faith formation appropriately to meet the spiritual quests and assimilation of faith in the local context.

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⁴¹ Vinay Samuel, “Re-Thinking Transformational Theology for the Public Square,” *Unpublished Essay*. Oxford, 2020.

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