THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY IN THE GLOBAL CHRISTIAN CONFIGURATION: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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KEYWORDS
African theology, Majority World, Christian, African traditional religion, Western

ABSTRACT
African theology is one of the emergent theologies that emanated from the stable of the Majority World nations, often generically referred to as Third World Theologies. They are emergent because they have a rather recent history compared to the older theological systems from the West. One characteristic feature of these theologies is that they are reactionary in nature. In the case of African theology, African theologians feel that Western missionaries denigrated and rubbished African traditional religions and culture, dubbing them to be primitive, satanic and archaic. In response, African theologians came up with a system of theology that uses African religion and cultural categories as its point of departure. The system is fraught with lots of biblical and theological pitfalls. African theology has proven to be syncretistic as it welds two dichotomous systems together. Therefore, the study is extending the existing premise of African theology by suggesting ways it can be more relevant to the Christian world. The study applied both the historical and phenomenological methodologies. It used the historical methodology to gather the historical evidence of the evolution of African theology and the phenomenological methodology to analyse it. The study found out that the anti-Western stance of African theology has alienated it from mainstream Christianity. The study has enriched the existing literature in the study area by positing that African theology should approach its theological system from a more biblio-centric premise so that it can remain true to historic Christianity. It can then argue its position from a pedestal of strength and avoid the accusation of being racially inclined.

Introduction

In the contemporary African theological equation, researches have shown that a lot of incongruence exists between normative Christian orthodox theology and the emergent African theology. Unlike the theologies and doctrinal positions of early African theologians such as, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, Athanasius of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo, which won universal validity among most Christian traditions, the African theology of today is operating from racial, cultural and traditional religious categories, which is difficult to accept elsewhere. There is no empirical

evidence to prove that in spite of the enormous contributions made by African theological colossi like Idowu, Mbiti, Bediako, Nyamiti, Tienou, and a host of others, African theology is gaining ground elsewhere. African theology is not winning converts to its fold either. It is only winning a few sympathetic voices from the West, but there is no assurance that it will win a universal validity either now or in the future.

Looking at the strides made by Christianity in the African continent in the last one hundred years, no one can gloss over African Christianity today. Walls (1976) has passionately argued that:

> *One of the most important events in the whole of Christian history has occurred in the lifetime of people who are not yet old. It has not yet reached the textbooks, and most Christians, including many of the best informed, do not know it has happened. It is simply nothing less than the shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity, so that the heartlands of the church are no longer in Europe, decreasingly in North America, but in Latin America, in certain parts of Asia, and in Africa.*

Going by Walls submission, no one can trifle with Christianity in the continent because it is now a key player in the global stage. Yet, African Christianity is not exerting the same kind of influence that early African theologians or Western Christianity did at the heights of their influence. African theologians need to present a front that shows that they are capable of leading the frontier of global Christianity. They have to be able to answer the following questions. What do they support? To what extent is what they are promoting relevant? In what ways do their roles contribute to the transformation of the many African church manifestations so that they themselves and others might live out the implications of the gospel? Jesus' famous remark, "By their fruit you shall know them," (Mt. 5:20) is the litmus test for a genuine Christianity. In view of the above, this paper has explored ways by which African theology can become a force to reckon with in Christendom.

Making African Theology Relevant

The manner in which individuals comprehend and react to life is invariably influenced by contextual factors and the particular social circumstances that mould their experiences. All theologies are culturally and socially situated. As Mushete (1994a) states: In that regard, African theology is similar to its Western counterpart in that it attempts to connect the Bible to the circumstances of the populace. However, this writer contends that before the text can be applied to a particular context or circumstance, a proper interpretation of the text must be established. This researcher disagrees with Van Eck (2021), who holds that the critical realistic honesty with which a hermeneutical endeavour is done is more significant than the accuracy of its interpretations or conclusions. Following Eck's advice will allow for a variety of subjective interpretations of the Bible, which is detrimental to biblical interpretation.

The argument that African theology should reject and split from all Western concepts has to be re-examined. African theology does not have to be distinct. Context is essential. A theology's worth is rarely accurately determined by how much it differs from other theologies. What makes a location valuable is the impact it has on the local population. African theology, according to Tienou (1990), must diverge from Western theology in order to produce a theology that is practical and will influence Africans in Africa as long as it is ideologically and culturally motivated. Instead of claiming that Africans live in a distinct environment, we need a theology that answers that reality (Punt, 2004).

Second, African theology should be biblical if it is to develop an African Christian theology. Because of God's revelation in the Bible, Christians believe in Him. Christians view Scripture as the primary source for theology and Christian living because they think that God speaks and has communicated with them via his Word. Given that most of what passes for African theology is insufficient due to its lack of a strong basis in Biblical exegesis, Parratt (1983) exhorts African theologians to take a true Biblical hermeneutics seriously. Some African theologians ignore the Bible entirely because they focus so much on traditional African religions as their source (2004).

Biblical theology is necessary for African theology to be Christian. The Bible describes God as the Creator of new life via the life (words and acts) of Jesus Christ, who is the Word. He is the one who can save us from sin and ourselves. Despite being mostly religious, Jesus' teachings did have social and political ramifications. Among other things, Jesus said that God is

accessible to all of his people, including social outcasts, the lame, the ill, the blind, and the filthy. Everyone was on an equal footing in his dominion. Both men and women were accepted. He worked on his open table. Everyone was welcome at his home. Everyone was treated equally and was welcome. He didn't leave anyone out. Joining this new family meant living the real life. It meant caring for other people, and leaving this new home meant protesting against whatever that was right.

African theology should be a theology of protest if it is to continue to be relevant to Africans in Africa (and, for that matter, the entire globe). On the basis of the Bible, it ought to protest against all that is anti-biblical in its surroundings and social life, including corruption, poverty, crime, neglect of the ill, nepotism, abuse of political and economic power, and mistreatment of women, to mention a few. However, it must first address people's spiritual needs.

The biblical concept of salvation is inherently based on the idea of liberty, and it would be incomplete without emancipation as a spiritual and sociopolitical concept (West, 1996). As the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the Living Word, the Truth, and the Life, Jesus is the only one who can provide complete redemption, according to Masamba ma Mpolo's (1983) historical-critical exegesis of the Gospel of John. According to Sawyerr, Mbiti, and Enang, cited in Onwu (1984), the biblical understanding of redemption emphasizes the necessity of being delivered not only from sin but also from illness, poverty, and malevolent powers.

Abogunrin (2000) concludes in a historical-critical and literary study on the Lucan view of Jesus Christ as the world's Saviour that while Luke does contain the idea of political liberation, the intention is a more comprehensive liberation that results in the complete well-being of God's people. According to Abogunrin (2000), Luke tells us that "the visible and invisible, the known and unknown, can no longer have any terror because Jesus the crucified risen Lord now fills the whole universe as Redeemer and Lord" for someone who has been made right with God through Jesus Christ.

To put it briefly, African theology must be contextual, scriptural, and able to meet the demands of the local populace if it is to have an impact on Africa for Africans. Only Jesus Christ is the Word of God, and only in Jesus Christ is new life possible. Therefore, life is the Word. Biblical interpretations have life-or-death implications, as West reminds us. A theology that is not grounded in the Bible, does not respond to the needs of the populace, and fails to provide individuals with a sense of purpose in their environment is a dead theology (West, 1996).

African Theology in the Global Theological Space

"History is the teacher of the nations," goes an old proverb, but "the nations never pay attention during the lesson" (Baur, 1994). Africa enjoys hearing about the roots of its people and the wisdom of the elders. However, there is a propensity to view the past as a timeless paradigm that should be applied to all situations. Church history informs us that we may learn from the faults of our ancestors since they occasionally did not accomplish things to the best of their abilities.

Responding to all forms of human poverty, including spiritual poverty and its repercussions, should be the goal of African theology in the modern global theological arena. In order to practice and fulfil the demands of the Good News of Jesus Christ, which aims at comprehensive deliverance, the church of the future must involve people in conversations about justice, peace, and sharing. The good news ought to be shared in a way that is relevant to the lives of those receiving it and should have an impact.

The adherence of African theology to the ancient gospel will be a crucial criterion for its destiny. Africa theology must undergo a rigorous exanimation of its express purpose in light of the multiplicity of churches. The task for African theology is to become the visible, accepted expression of the gospel in Africa, much alone the Christian world at large. Early African theologians were successful because their theologies were founded on strong biblical hermeneutics, which gained them acceptance among the majority of Christian traditions. Consequently, their theological stances formed the cornerstone of Western Christian philosophy.

It is unclear how and when African theology will impact Christianity worldwide if it hasn't been able to change the trajectory of Christianity inside its own domain. African theology

promotes ideas that are not fundamental to either modern day Africa or the Christian world at large. It is ineffective to insist on preserving African indigenous faiths and culture in order to sever ties with the Western church due to colonialism and the disparage of African heritage by former missionaries.

By reflecting the unity, we want in Africa, African theologians should be concerned with the church's seeming unity. In Africa, a conscious attempt to bring churches together has come to a halt. Because theological reflections in academic institutions have little to do with the ecumenical posture of the churches and even less with the visible unity of the church, ecumenically oriented theology as experienced and discussed in universities and theological institutions where African theologians hold sway has little influence on the formation of visible unity among the churches. This researcher argues that Africa's purported theological think tank should take a more constructive approach to these issues in order to benefit the church's future. In this manner, it will likewise affect and transform the church in other climes. Christians are members of the same body and whatever affects the body in one part of the world affects everyone everywhere.

The church of today contains the germ of the church of the future. In order for the future church to be a worthy tool in God's hands, it is very important that Christians take part in a process of rebuilding and change. The church has yet to acknowledge the detrimental problems that surround and exist within it throughout the majority of Africa. It has not yet gazed into the mirror of Christ; it is still oblivious to how it seems to the observer. Those who identify as members of the body of Christ will recognize our differences and turn to accept others once the church looks directly into the mirror. In this regard, African theologians may be quite influential.

Humans are not in charge of the church of Jesus Christ's future. The future Church's members must consciously work to carry out God's will in God's world. God desires for us to be happy. Jesus of Nazareth came to share the good news with everyone on the planet. The church of the future will be a Good News community.

African Theology and the Quest for Moral Rectitude

The field of moral rearmament is another area in which African theology may help build a strong future for both Africa and the world. Churches have broadened their moral horizons in recent years and are starting to address topics that lead politicians to accuse them of interfering in politics and urging them to stay in the pulpit. The entirety of life—personal and professional, political, economic, cultural, and spiritual is impacted by morality.

It is the church's divine responsibility to address issues that impact the welfare of all Africans. Many people have no voice because of extreme poverty and other types of marginalization. People in peril and misery physically go to the Church for safety, particularly when they are fleeing from firearms and arrows. The institutional Church has been forced to deal with the many problems plaguing society. The finest person to lead Africa's moral rehabilitation is the Church. As stated by Gana (1997):

> *The need to use the Church's tremendous moral and political power to advance justice is the issue it faces as the twenty-first century approaches. Direct conflict with the African ruling elites and their foreign supporters is necessary in the African environment.*

Impunity is one of the main ethical considerations in the pursuit and advancement of justice. In times of war or dictatorship, impunity is "the means by which persons accused of crimes against humanity escape being charged, tried, and punished for criminal acts committed with official sanction" (Harper, 1966). Amnesty legislation and presidential pardons for convicted offenders are other ways that impunity is attained. It can also be accomplished by purposefully not taking any action against criminals who are well positioned nationally and, as a result, somewhat above the law.

In Africa, impunity is becoming a more serious moral issue as the "long arm of the law" disproportionately targets the weak and impoverished while major offenders are allowed to intimidate and go free. However, the reality that impunity obstructs forgiveness and healing

may be much graver. According to a case study on impunity in Peru, political expediency may cause terms like forgiveness and reconciliation to be purposefully devalued.

> *The ruling class aims to change the definitions of forgiveness and reconciliation from their true meanings to one that is more convenient for them. To put it another way, reconciliation is predicated on the denial of reality, injustice for a large number of people, and impunity and power for a select few. Repentance and reparation on the side of the perpetrator are not necessary for forgiveness; only the act of generosity on the part of the aggrieved is. These elites may then accuse the impudent justice seekers of harming peace and democracy and pursuing petty self-interests by using the terms forgiveness and reconciliation for their own purposes (Harper, 1996).*

Whatever its form, state-instigated violence is a breach of society's well-being. Instead of fostering peace, it exacerbates suspicions, polarizes people and their leaders, and inflames public ire, frequently along ethnic lines. African theologians may either keep quiet and work together, possibly unintentionally, or they can use their writings and scholarly endeavors to support the church's use of its moral authority to combat impunity. African theologians are free to choose to use the third-party concept of adjudication, which is so common in African society. They must use the Golden Rule, which is a set of biblical moral precepts provided by Jesus that states, "Do to others as you would like them to do to you" (Mt. 7:12).

Regretfully, when it comes to morality inside its ranks, the church itself is in desperate need of moral renovation. Regarding the morals problem, people frequently doubt the church's authority to accuse others. They frequently question the Church's capacity to lead moral change when she fails to live out her teachings.

There is no denying the Church's flaws, according to Kinoti (1994), and her only choice is to be changed so that she is genuinely the Church of Jesus Christ, a dazzling Church that is holy and blameless and devoid of wrinkles, stains, and other imperfections (Ephesians 5:25-27). Like the rest of the world, contemporary African culture is struggling with a morally decaying world, and it is necessary to remind people of the many positive principles that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has enhanced. African theologians can guide the church in upholding all the fundamental moral requirements that are based on solid traditional African values and biblical principles (Kinoti, 1994).

African Theology and Socioeconomic Justice

Since there are resources and knowledge that may help mankind overcome poverty, inadequacy is not the true issue facing the modern world. The divide of humanity into the affluent and the poor is the true issue that leads to suffering, conflicts, and animosity between people. There are two tiers to this division. A small number of people in nation governments are extremely wealthy, and their money grants them considerable influence. However, the great majority of individuals experience poverty and hardship to varied degrees.

What does this signify for those who dedicate their life to the Church's service? In all of these, where does the church stand? Even if they disagree with the church and/or its goal, many individuals nonetheless believe that it is essential to socioeconomic liberation. This might be due to two factors. First, the church is elevated to the position of being able to advocate for economic justice due to its history as a socioeconomic justice agency. Over the past three centuries, Western nations have reached Olympian heights in terms of social fairness and economic progress, thanks in large part to the church. As a result, many continue to believe that the church is essential in this respect. The second justification appears more realistic.

People frequently believe that the church's role is restricted to defending and rescuing people from the grip of economic injustice and societal evils. They frequently overlook the truth that these advantages are only the inevitable result of the gospel of Jesus Christ's transformative power. In order for these other goods to be added to His disciples, Jesus warned them to first seek the kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33). In order to serve meals, people frequently urge the church to stop preaching the Bible (Acts 6:2, 4).

However, it is impossible to read the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and overlook the harsh cautions against religion that disregards

the suffering of others. Because they lacked the human components of justice and morality, Amos denounced vacuous religious rites (Amos 5:21-24). James also denounced the mindset of the wealthy who use sanctimonious rhetoric to avoid their tangible obligations to their brother Jas. 14–17. Because he did not care for poor Lazarus, the rich man was condemned (Lk. 16:19-28). Avers by Nyerere (1997):

> *The Church can only expect to lessen hate and spread its teaching of love to all people by doing these actions. Its love must manifest itself in deeds for the greater good and against evil. Because the Church is associating itself and Christianity with injustice if it tolerates long-standing abuses, the church can only help us grow by sharing our efforts, struggles, knowledge, persecution, and advancements. This entails participating in every way as "members one of another," as the Church cannot be considered a part of us if it does not share in our poverty and fight against injustice and poverty.*

The Church is urged in Nyerere's homily to acknowledge the need for social change and to take the initiative in bringing about it. The church has always been called upon to spearhead societal change. The Jewish people, starting with Jesus in the first century, had anticipated that he would be a political revolutionary who would liberate them from Roman rule. Because his kingdom is not of this world, Jesus rejected the endeavor (Jn. 18:36). The church should not ignore the social evils afflicting the world because of Christian compassion and the nature of its mission.

The world shouldn't confine the church's purpose to resolving socioeconomic disparities or equate it with it. That is already being done by regional and international organizations. Higher duties are expected of the church. It tackles the underlying causes of injustice, which are humanity's fallen nature and lead to poverty, oppression, discrimination, and exploitation. Man is prone to inhumane behavior because of his sinful nature. Any attempt to improve that sinful nature will backfire until it is addressed by unity with Christ.

It is utopian to expect social fairness without experiencing the transformation brought about by Jesus Christ. It is frequently said that the missionaries who spread the gospel neglected people's monetary and physical well-being by failing to encourage their converts to participate in politics. Considering the healthcare, education, and other social programs they introduced, this claim is completely untrue. They just decided that preserving lives should be their top goal. The African church needs to set priorities.

African Theology and the New World Order

The focus on culture in African theology has overshadowed other significant concerns facing the region and the wider world. Two issues have resulted from this. One is that the unwavering focus on traditional values prevents an honest evaluation of how seriously the educated African of today regards these beliefs. It has been assumed that even posing this question implies that these views are irrelevant. It is not necessary to be an anthropological to recognize that there is a significant conflict amongst African value systems today and that a straightforward return to the past may not be feasible or even desirable. Traditional values have undoubtedly proven incredibly resilient, and it's possible to claim that their influence is growing even in urban areas. Africans with education face a challenging world. Some have questioned if theologians of the first generation, such as Mbiti and Idowu, had irrational expectations for the effect of these ideals because they were brought up in a culture that was far more homogeneous than it is today. A more selective usage of indigenous religions has been urged by a more contemporary evaluation of African theology (Fashole-Luke, 1981).

The second issue is a result of the aforementioned situation. African theologians have almost always used industrialization and urbanization negatively. The African soul has been viewed as being harmed by the process of development. And the main reaction that Christians are expected to make has been viewed as, at least in part, a return or recovery of traditional values. This is odd as the Christian experience is meant to break free from previous attachments to influences and entanglements. According to Dyrness (1990), this raises a significant dilemma for African theologians: What constructive role is the church playing in modernization?

It appears that the impact of contemporary ideals on the African psyche has only been favourably discussed by secular thinkers and observers. According to Kwasi Wiredu (1980), Africa needs to adopt contemporary science. Additionally, in "The African Condition," Ali Mazrui (1980) lays out the agenda for Africa in the coming generation. In fact, he observes, "Ethnicity in Africa should have declined, the state system might have gotten stronger and more consolidated, ideology more sophisticated and enriched, and religion on the defensive when this century does indeed stagger out in sheer exhaustion" (Mazani, 1980). Since it never occurred, hindsight has shown Mazrui to be incorrect.

Therefore, it is still unclear where the African Christian theologians who would address these issues are. Have African theologians been worried that by speaking favorably about these issues, they might come seen as supporting colonial ideals? In the foreseeable future, these problems will pose a significant challenge to African theology. According to Parratt (1987), Desmond Tutu has acknowledged this requirement. He observes that:

> *Although African theology has been successful in restoring the African spirit, it has mostly fallen short in providing meaningful responses to the myriad of current issues facing modern-day Africa. Because so little has been presented that is relevant, such as regarding the theology of power in the face of the pandemic of coups and military dictatorship... [and] other equally important contemporary challenges, it has appeared to promote detachment from the busy work of life.*

He continues by pointing out that a more abrasive theology, like liberation theology, would be better suitable for these problems. Although they are mostly located in southern Africa, he reminds us that there are theologians in Africa who are interested in these issues (Parratt, 1987).

Theologians in that area have a tendency to criticize what we have dubbed African theology, viewing it as a diversion from the continent's actual problems. These theologians contend that topics that have been overlooked up to this point in the conversation ought to be included. According to Parratt (1978), who cited Manas Buthelezi, the issue with emphasizing the African worldview is that it frequently isolates Africans from their current reality. According to Torres (1978), "To be a person means to have power to be truly a person; it means power for liberation to be a person." This context is meaningless if Africans are not provided with the practical and spiritual means to be themselves. It can be deduced that African theologians are attempting to solve problems where none exists.

The majority world, particularly Africa, frequently disparages the secular endeavour, while the West worships it. According to Peter Berger, all of the theologies that originate from the Majority World's stable, with the significant exception of the Philippine one, can be classified as counter modernising ideologies. He and his associates attempt to characterize the cognitive aspect of the modernisation process in their seminal work, The Homeless Mind (1978). They note that certain ways of thinking—such as rationality and measurability, anonymous social ties and the division of private and public life, and the separability of means and ends—have emerged as a result of technologically driven economic progress (Berger, 1978).

This way of thinking has been ingrained in the Western worldview and is being transmitted to the Majority World along with technology and development programs. Although first embraced, this approach is now encountering growing scepticism and open resistance, particularly among the Majority World's educated elite. The return of nationalism and the reassertion of traditional values—what Berger refers to as counter-modernizing influences—are common forms of opposition (1978). African Christianity has had a complicated, if not contentious, role in all of them. In the first place, this contemporary awareness are spread by missionaries. Typically first or second generation Christians, the theologically reflective Christians have an uncomfortable relationship with both their missionary professors and the modernism they introduced (Dyrness, 1990).

The majority of these responses stem from a desire to restore indigenous values and, more crucially, a sense of dignity that will permit local expression. However, some of them fail to acknowledge the unavoidable impact that contemporary ideals have had on their own thought processes. "Most interactions between various cognitive systems result in mutual contamination," as Berger notes (Dyrness, 1990). Indeed, using contemporary concepts is

the only way to counter modernise! It is obvious that the global modernization of the economy, communication, transportation, and even fashion has become almost unstoppable. We are trapped with these contemporary packaging and cannot toss them out (Dyrness, 1990).

The present debt crisis and the ensuing structural changes demonstrate that, in some ways, the Majority World has even less alternatives in this area than the West. While their counterparts in the Majority World compete for the few available jobs or the coveted spots in secondary schools, young people in the West have the option of abandoning the rat race and traveling the world to discover who they are. They lack the time and resources to suggest alternate strategies for economic expansion, as do their elders.

Therefore, Western theology continues to explore the human and human freedom in creation, both in spite of and partly as a result of the rising secularism. Technology, economic growth, the environment, peace studies, and the media (particularly the difficulties of translating and understanding Scripture) have been its main areas of concentration. Both in the West and the Majority World, these issues are of utmost importance (9Dyrness, 1990).

The shortcoming of theological thinking in Africa is the absence of meaningful engagement with these challenges. Theologians from the Majority World have this shortcoming because they have persisted on upholding their principles, even at the price of their own "progress." African theologians are hesitant to accept the very human treasures that African youngsters are searching the globe for while hungering for. Maybe if African theologians can be silent long enough to listen, they will be able to communicate with their Western counterparts. When this occurs, it's possible that Western Christian theologians, who are aware that Africans have something to say, will once more be able to hear from them—this time not as students but as equals—who will have the opportunity to provide both critique and praise.

Conclusion

African theologians played an indispensible role in the formulation of sound biblical doctrines in the early centuries of the Christian church. They laid the foundation of Western Christian thought. Such African theologians as Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, Athanasius of Alexandria, and St. Augustine of Hippo have become theological colossi whose theological positions are acceptable to most Christian traditions. The situation has however changed today in African. Instead of occupying the centre stage in the global Christian configuration, it has retreated to a defensive position where African traditional religion and culture is used to project its position. For African theology to regain a prime of place as it did in the earlier centuries, it has to retrace its steps back to authentic biblical theology. The syncretistic posture it has adopted at present is not healthy for its mission in the world.

African theology must also be involved in combating moral decadence in Africa beginning from its own constituency. The church must live above board before it can point accusing fingers on others. Again, African theology should not limit its mission to soul winning alone. It should also be involved in fighting for socioeconomic justice. Jesus whom the church imitates was a social crusader against injustice and oppression. Finally, African theology should not attach itself solely to the apron string of African tradition and culture that no longer serves the need of the age. It must embrace the tools provided by science and technology to enhance its message delivery.

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