

African Theology in the 21st Century: Mapping Out Critical Priorities

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Abstract

There is a dialogue taking place in the area of African Theology; “do we call it African Christian theology or African Theology and how it relates to the African culture”? Depending on where one sits, any name will carry the day as long as it fulfills the academic desire intended. What is important is the dialogue that is taking place between the Bible and the African culture. Here, we shall take the name “African Theology” as the norm. It is evident in almost all ways that from a walk which is based on the mapping of African theology or from the wide variety of current understandings of its nature and task, there are several priorities in African Theology. A number of theologians today argue that the priorities of African theology are many. These include providing a clear and comprehensive dialogue between African culture and the Bible in relation to the African faith. They argue that the Bible has also been translated into local languages in order to enable the African cultures to become intelligible in the way they relate to the scriptures. On the other hand, others have prioritized the definition of African Theology so that they can deal with it from their perspective of African Traditional Religions. Also, others want to prioritize African Theology as a reflection of the praxis of Christian faith within a relatively deprived community. Therefore, this article seeks to briefly provide some priorities in African Theology, such as liberation, reconstruction, and poverty reduction theologies. In this study, we will proceed to explore the need for a definition of African Theology, how it relates to African Christian faith, and the challenges posed by African Theology to the Christian faith. We will conclude with the general guidelines on formulating the priorities of African theology.

Keywords: African Theology, Theologians, Christian faith, Christianity

Introduction

In the 21st century, there has been a flood of ideas on how to deal with African Theology and in particular the sources. Generally, it has been assumed

that there are three major theological currents that have emerged in Africa in the last two decades: indigenization of Christianity as well as the place of liberation theology in Africa. However, the theological and ecclesiastical landscape in Africa has changed within the last two decades. The presence of African theology in Africa is not very clear. As a result, there was a dialogue that took place. Perhaps, this is because the theology of African churches has gone beyond what the missionary originally intended. African Theology in Africa is like a new bicycle in the hands of a group of boys.

The riding of this new bicycle simply meant that Africans had to own their theological discourse. Thus, there is a call on these theologians to take seriously their African traditional heritage and allow it to freely interact with their Christian faith which results to prioritization. This requires the African theological priorities to be set within the broader context of political, educational, and religious factors in Africa. However, it is not easy to determine exactly what the main African Theological priorities are. In response to the question on this subject, we would like to start with the definition of African theology.

Defining African Theology

There are various perceptions about African theology which are important in the definition of what African Theology truly is. One of the major concerns in African Theology is its definition by African theologian who have attempted to articulate Christian theology from the perspective of their Traditional African Context (TAC). It is agreeable that for a long time, Christianity in Africa has been determined to a large extent by missionary forms of Christianity, which were brought by explorers and missionaries. For this reason, the theology in Africa was strongly influenced by missionary theology which was considered up to 1960s. Later on, when majority of African nations gained independence, African Christian Theology (ACT) emerged as a new field of academic research. This resulted to the acknowledgement of the need to incarnate the Gospel, using the best insights from African context that is compatible with the Gospel of Christ.

Therefore, the fathers of African Theology such as Mbiti (1969), Idowu (1973), and Mugambi (1991), among others, prioritized the definition of African Theology by offering an analysis and interpretation of the African culture in a dialogue with Christian faith. Such sentiments were strengthened by many conferences that were held to discuss the place of African Theology based on our context. An example of such a meeting was an African Conference of Churches meeting held in Abidjan in 1969, which defined African Theology as a theology that is grounded on the Bible and which speaks to the Africans mind set. However, this was as expressed in categories of thought which arise based on the philosophy of the African people.

According to John Mbiti, the term “African Theology” means a theological reflection and expression by African Christians. For Muzorewa, African Theology is an attempt to respond to a mandate to construct a biblically-based and relevant theology that speaks to the spiritual needs of the African people. African Theologians are in agreement that Western or Asian theologies do not touch the hearts of the African believers because they are based on a religious language which is foreign to them. Hence, there is a quest for a relevant African theology. For this reason, defining African Theology has become a cultural factor that only African theologians could undertake the task.

The desire to define African Theology by Africans increased in the mid-20th century when African Theology as a theological discipline came into being. A wave of protest against negative colonial and missionary interpretations of the religion and culture in Africa was on the rise. Africans were more and more becoming aware that theology is a contextual phenomenon and, hence, they began to read the Scriptures using their mother tongue. Hence, this resulted to some interpretations that were not in agreement with Western theology interpretations. African theology as a discipline was undertaken to shape Christianity in Africa by adapting and using African concepts and ideas.

African scholars have decided to give priority to the study of African Theology in order to position African Christianity in a playing ground level. This made African Theology to develop from one level to the other. This development was due to the zeal of African Christians’ piety and activism which prompted them to react in a faith-inspired way to the profound social and political changes which characterized modern post-colonial Africa. It is within this framework of general orientation that African Theology attempted to reconstruct Christian faith in order for it to respond to the demands of African contexts and experiences.

There was no plan to develop African theology as an academic discipline. It evolved as a phenomenological area of study with its own specific African criteria for theological constructs. African theologians found themselves in Western institutions doing traditional Western Theology which they discovered it was inadequate for the African spirituality. Prior to their discovery, they quickly came up with proposals of a theology which could cater for their spiritual desperation, and which continued to grow as they went deeper into Western Theology. They had to come up with alternatives such as having their theological reflections. Therefore, this made African Theologians to take their African cultural heritage seriously in a systematic manner, so as to Africanize, liberate, reconstruct as well as reduce economic marginalization.

Priorities in African theology Africanization of Christianity

The first major priority in African Theology was to ensure that Christian Theology was able to interact with African culture in a plane ground, by giving African expression to the Christian faith within a theological framework (Bediako Kwame, 2006, 43). This involves a conscious engagement of a dialogue between missionary Christian thinking and African religious thinking in order to develop a counter point for the purposes of integrating Christianity into the life and culture of African people. According to Mbiti, the chief yardstick for determining the validity of any Christian theology purporting to be African was its 'Biblical basis'. For him, "nothing can substitute for the Bible". This is because with African Traditional Religions and other aspects of African culture, the Bible has a well respected status and place in African theology. "Any viable theology must and should have a biblical basis", declared Mbiti, more than a decade ago (Mbiti, 2009).

Therefore the subject of African Theology should be approached from the context of Africanity, if it does make sense. This approach will place emphasis on the culture of the African people whom African Theology reaches, thus making Africanity the primary factor in the method of carrying out African Theology and spirituality. Currently, the scholarship method is that of Western orientation and it engages African experience as an afterthought. To a very large extent, this approach is disadvantageous to the development of African Theology and spirituality.

However, African Theologians have realized that the indigenization of Christian thought is the only way to contextualize the Gospel of Christ. They have given priority to their context into which the Gospel had been planted, watered, and has germinated. Africans were so receptive to Christianity that it took a very short time for the missionaries to convert them to a new way of life (Waweru, 2011, 5). This context, however, refers to the traditional African culture, norms, and values. Without any contradiction, this was the beginning of the African Indigenous Churches (AICs). This then gave birth to a preaching; a praying; a singing; and a rhythm that was acceptable to the African Christians throughout the continent. This Africanization process was properly aided by local African languages as Mbiti rightly puts it: "Aided by the biblical revelation and faith in Jesus Christ, Africans grounded their approach to Christianity on what they knew best as traditional African religions" (Mbiti, 2009, 162). As a result, African cultures flourished once more among the African elites who adopted Christianity which is quite different from the way the missionary thinks. These African theologians ended up acquiring a respectful understanding of the differences between missionary religious world view and the African Christian world view, which finally

helped to ensure the viability of the Christian church in Africa (Waweru, 2011, 9).

Therefore, the beginning of Africanizing Christianity was on course by mid-twentieth century. Perhaps, we could say the starting point of this process came from a European Franciscan missionary in the Belgian Congo by the name of Placide Tempels in 1945. This was possible through his book *Bantu Philosophy* which was published in French. It was from this Francophone Africa that a student of theology, known as Vincent Mulago, also published his Ph.D. thesis in French in 1956 entitled the 'Bantu Vital Union'. Thus, this made him the first African published theologian. In the same year, another French speaking African Theologian, Alexis Kagame, published his thesis titled "The Bantu-Rwandan Philosophy" in French. At the same period of time, another publication of a collection of articles under the title *Des Prêtres Noirs s'interrogent*, or "Black Priests Ask" was in circulation.

The Anglophone Africa felt the need to follow the steps taken by Francophone Africa in the Africanization of Christianity. In 1969, an All-Africa Conference of Churches was held in Abidjan and Nigeria, where a resolution was passed that "African Theology is 'a theology based on the Biblical faith of Africans, and which speaks to the African language'". The understanding here was that the Gospel of Christ must be made relevant to the African context. In the minds of these theologians, Africanization of the gospel had to take place so that Christianity ceases to be a foreign religion in Africa. They demanded a contextualization without a compromise. The main theological question that arose from this dialogue was: "Can we have a dialogue between the Bible and African culture that is free from syncretism or a return to African traditional religion (Waweru, 2011, 1).

There was a strong belief among these African theologians that there was nothing new about religion from the missionaries who popularized Christianity in Africa. They argued that it is we Africans who are adding value to Christianity by offering an African divinity, which was well articulated and all-pervasive to the world of Christianity. This was well summarized by Bolaji Idowu (1973) who concluded in his book on *African Traditional Religion* by praising a faithful remnant of African Religious who held steadfast to their forefathers and mothers practices of African Traditional beliefs that are now the source of the rejuvenation of our faith. Nevertheless, African culture is dynamic and it is changing rapidly. Also, it is becoming more urbanized and modernized, which now calls for a liberating Theological system to be prioritized.

Liberation Theology

Another priority in African Theology was the liberating movement that demanded a reading of the Bible that could listen to the African voices.

Without wasting time, this liberating trend has become a household name, which is becoming very popular in most parts of Africa. In the early 60s, African Theologians had started using the theology of liberation to articulate issues in the African soil which were characterized by colonialism, apartheid, and the cold war. Liberation Theology had three main waves. The first wave is based on the indigenous socioeconomic system, the second wave take after the Latin American liberation model, and the third wave involves a combination of elements from both approaches. These waves seek genuine human promotion in the context of the poverty and political powerlessness of Africa. Also, it takes the form of Christian reflection within the context of the poor and the oppressed. Indeed, Mugambi (2003) observes that liberation Theology encouraged praxis as its method of theologizing-relating theory to practice and deriving theory from practice. The liberation movement challenged the academics to join the ‘masses’ in the struggle for economic justice. As a result of this challenge, there was a paradigm shift from analyzing the social structures to a commitment of changing them. The African liberationists then acquired a reading of the gospel that would offer a liberating message for Africans from their state of poverty, oppression, and exploitation. This is a Theology whose output cannot be underrated.

It focused on rectifying the glaring injustices in African societies. Liberation theology began in this continent due to the racial discrimination experienced by our African brothers and sisters in the colonized Africa as well as South Africa where Black Theology thrived. The fathers of this Theology can be named as Alan Boesak and Desmond Tutu who undoubtedly became audible voices of liberation in the South African Church. As early as in 1970s, Black Theology came to South Africa with some *Essays on Black Theology* being published in 1972 in Johannesburg. However, this theology was banned by the government before they reached the bookstores. In the 1970s, Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak were rationalizing Black Theology within African Christian thought.

However, they were quickly accused of engaging in a reductionist theological thought by Mbiti who wrote, ‘What I view as an excessive preoccupation with liberation may well be the chief limitation of Black Theology’. For Mbiti, Africa needed a more embarrassing theology than Black Theology, which he argued that it cannot and will not become an African Theology. He accused Black Theology of parochialism by saying it hardly knows the situation of Christian living in Africa. As a result, its direct relevance to Africa is either nonexistent or only accidental. For him, African Theology is concerned with many more issues, including all the classical theological themes, plus localized topics. This simply meant that Black Theology was a local topic.

Consequently, this provocation by Mbiti led liberation theology to move beyond racial issues, making socioeconomic liberation a major concern for liberation theology. Allan Boesak equally accused James Cone of reducing liberation theology to the racial issue. He argued that Black Theology must focus on full liberation of African humanity. It has to focus on the dependency of the oppressed and their liberation from dependency in all its dimensions whether psychological, cultural, political, economical, and theological (Boesak, 1977).

Liberation theology is a theological response to the problems of the African people who were subjected to poverty and injustice without any justified reason. Liberation theology is a cry for redemption and justice. Liberation theology for Africans is likened to the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus Christ himself who stood in the gap. Unfortunately, liberation theology has often been one-sided. For Bénézet Bujo, the main problem is ‘the mass poverty of Africa’ (Bujo, 1992). Although some church leaders have spoken out on behalf of the poor, “it must be said that the church of Africa has been a silent church”. Jean-Marc Éla supports Bujo’s call for economic liberation (Mugambi, 1991, 36). The one sidedness of liberation theology made it to mutate to other forms of liberation theology in Africa such as Feminist theology; African women Theology; Environmental Theology among others which now focuses on the unique situations and contexts in Africa, including the poverty being experienced by our people.

Therefore, one of the priorities of African liberation theology was to contextualize the Gospel into the context of injustice and poverty within Africa. It was an African cry for justice within an unjust world. Africans are aware of the massive corruption and injustice within their Christian communities. As a result, the prioritization of the liberation of the individual from the oppressive systems in the continent was the way forward. Hence, the need for reconstruction theology was realized.

Reconstruction Theology

Africans came to a reawakening that the gains of liberation Theology will not benefit them unless they are engaged in reconstruction theology (Mugambi, 1991,36). Things were not right; a reconstruction had to take place immediately, making Reconstruction Theology the latest theological project in Africa (Maluleke, 2001, 172). So from 1990, this theology established itself with a number of publications having come out on the subject. African theologians have been looking for new ways to interpret the gospel in Africa, in light of the prevailing conditions in the continent. For Mugambi, Reconstruction Theology seeks to interpret scriptures to re-create a new world order for God and his people. Reconstruction Theology has now become the

basis for recreating anew the African social economic reality from a scriptural perspective (Mugambi, 1991, 36). It has become a theology of people that is: Proactive rather than reactive; complementary rather than competitive; integrative rather than disintegrative; programme-driven rather than project-driven; people centred rather than institution-centred; deed-oriented rather than world-oriented; participatory rather than autocratic; regenerative rather than degenerative; future-sensitive rather than past-sensitive; co-operative rather than confrontational; consultative rather than impositional (Mugambi 1995, xv).

Furthermore, reconstruction Theology is another major priority for African theologians in the last two decades (Mugambi, 2003, 210). Churches have used this new ideological thinking to respond to the contemporary issues that are affecting the African continent (Kwame Bediako, 2006, 43). Africa has now engaged in the reconstruction of its culture, economy as well as political life. Mugambi (1995, 2) says that reconstruction is a concept within the social sciences, which should be of interest to sociologists, economists, and political scientists. It is a multidisciplinary appeal of reconstruction which makes the concept functionally useful as a thematic focus for reflection in Africa during the coming decades. The process has helped in creating considerable efforts of reconciliation and confidence-building among African communities. Reconstruction theology is purely a renewal concept that has been invented by African theologians. It is a process of review. Thus, this is only possible if the Africans are concerned with a reconstruction that will help to reduce poverty in Africa.

Poverty Reduction Theology

Poverty reduction theology is another priority in African Theology that creates hope among the poor African Christians, although it is usually neglected in the academic publications. Oftentimes, poverty reduction theology is left to African evangelicals. Since poverty reduction is so dominant in African Pentecostal preaching, it needs to be treated as a new priority in African Christian theology. It is defined as the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth, and that they can obtain these blessings through faith and the “sowing of seeds” through the faithful payments of tithes, first fruits, and love offerings. This is a misleading approach to poverty reduction. A theology that reduces poverty in Africa is a contextualized theology of modern African context. Therefore, this is a theology that is from within Africa with its social and economic problems that has bedeviled the African communities like corruption, political rivalries, and ethnicity. Tokunboh Adeyemo says that Africa is an enigma, which is something hard to understand or explain. He stated that when one considers all the resources available in Africa, such as land, natural and cultivated

vegetation, animals, water systems, minerals, the various sources of energy, and above all the beautiful people and their spirituality, one is stunned to learn about the poverty in Africa (Adeyemo, 2000, 31).

Poverty reduction is the common talk both for the Church as well as the political leadership in Africa. It creates a common ground between the political arena and the evangelical arena. It believes in the power of prayer and the possibility of miracles to reduce poverty, unemployment, and barrenness. It emphasizes the power of Jesus Christ to provide the daily needs of individuals. It also has the power of victory that overcomes evil spiritual powers that result to poverty in the African societies. Poverty eradication theology assumes that every Christian has a right to be liberated from poverty. It assumes that God will make every Christian rich at their own time; Christians are only expected to do the right things while they leave the rest to God.

It assumes that poverty is an indication of being disobedient to the word of God, particularly in the area of tithing and giving in the Church. This is a theology that would bring glory to the affected communities. Theology of poverty reduction is concerned with one's own glory instead of the whole community. Although this is a theology of development, it deviates from liberation theology in that it creates a unique utopia. This theology is very conspicuous in African preaching, which makes it a priority that is prominent in Africa and it emerges as a distinct type of theology in African Theology.

However, it is important to note that early missionary theology eulogized the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to heaven and also tends to neglect this present world context. Such a theology tends to be individualistic and other-worldly. Salvation is for the individual who trusted in Jesus Christ. And for these individuals, the kingdom of God is the church. Therefore, Christians were not to be involved in politics and in wealth accumulation since these were worldly desires.

In contrast to early missionary theology of heaven, African Theology is now much more interested in this world. Contemporary African Theology has prioritized poverty reduction by putting the Gospel into the modern context of poverty, suffering, unemployment, and disease eradication. African poverty reduction theology argues that Jesus Christ is the answer to these problems, but hard work must accompany the gospel. It is thus necessary to believe that faith in Jesus is not only for one's personal Salvation, but also for living a good life here on earth. Faith in Jesus will guarantee eternal life in heaven and prosperity here on earth. It will provide solutions to our problems on this earth.

Poverty reduction theology teaches the reality of the spirit world and it demonstrates the reality of good and bad spirits in African thought today. This new poverty reduction theology is an indigenous form of African

Theology, which is non-formal. It is an African contextualized theology that is distinct from other African theologies. In 1992, President Yoweri K Museveni of Uganda in his book, *What Is Africa's Problem?*, discusses five major problems as the root cause of the continent's distress which should guide a theological reflection in Africa today. These includes bad politics and politicians; communication difficulties; an easier environmental condition that leads to idleness; lack of aggressiveness in business; and foreign domination, especially in the economy.

Challenges Confronting African Theology Today

1. African theology has remained largely in the academy, and African believers are still divided on which practices to adopt and Africanize in spite of the increasing number of Christians in Africa. A contextualized African-theology is needed to establish continuity between African traditional life and the new found faith. The task of African theology is to help fulfill their African sense of humanity.
2. The African continent has a history that is largely tragic, including socio-political, economic, and religious chaos, which remains a challenge to African faith. Bad governance and manipulation of ethnic and religious differences have resulted into worse poverty for the Africans. Many African Christians have been cheated and misled, leaving them confused, discouraged, and betrayed.
3. Critical evaluation of African Theology portrays Africa as sick, starved, bleeding, and crippled both economically and spiritually. Reports indicate that Africa has suffered active conflict and human rights abuse. There are diverse problems that need to be tackled by leaders called for the purpose of reconstruction theology in African society.
4. The African church is finding itself in the middle of a multi-religious society. Though Christianity is still the majority religion in Africa, the African church will need to find answers regarding its position towards other religions.
5. Africanization is an urgent priority in the life of African Churches, for the firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa. This makes evangelization to be a path towards a holistic growth rather than a spiritual gospel that does not take care of the African problems. This is one of the greatest challenges for the Church on the continent on the eve of the third millennium.
6. The Church places a lot of emphasis on the role of the family in evangelization. However, stable families are dependent on rich cultural values and identity which are handed over from generation to generation. The African Theology faces great challenges in this area from the intrusive nature of modern means of communication (internet and social media).
7. The Church in Africa feels specially called to intervene positively in order to help bring about the establishment of the rule of law and democratic

processes. With political conflicts endlessly ravaging Africa, hampering social development in the process, African theologians are required to go beyond academic theology, and then begin to reflect on the faith of the people, and to examine its foundations. In such a case, African theologians are called to redefine the priorities of African Theology in order to take up these challenges.

Redefining Priorities in African Theology

What is required in African theology today is how to bridge the gap between Christian professionals and Christian believers in Africa. However, this can only be bridged by an effective African theological dialogue within and without the continent. African Theologians needs to come together and formulate an authentic African theological discourse to ensure that African Religion has regained its position in Africa in order to engage a proper dialogue with biblical content and biblical models of life. The essence of a theology of dialogue and consultation would be an expression of what God commands to be taught, whom he commands to teach, how he commands the teaching to be carried out, and what would be the context of that teaching.

The objectives of the dialogue would be the clear understanding of the principles of Christian life in the Bible in relation to the African traditional Religion's conviction of sin and repentance. The goals of consultation in African Theology would be a theology fully transformed into a level playing ground, where no religion is condemned but listed in order to produce Christ-like lifestyles for the African people. This is possible in Africa when a theological consultation is contextualized, and the method of teaching theology engages Africans in their own contexts. The consultation would produce a contextualized theology in Africa which then would be communicated through contextualized dialogues within African societies.

Therefore, the essence of an authentic African theological consultation has three major roles:

1. A dialogue that protects the Bible against academics minds that are destructive to the authenticity of the Holy Scriptures in order to allow a dialogue that does more than just authentically communicating the story of Jesus. This has to be done through a theological consultation that considers the context in which the Bible texts were written; the Historical Jesus and the Jesus of Faith; the African church's issues and how to keep alive the Memories of those gone before us. This would simply mean a theology that helps prevent African society from falling into the trap of utopia religion in the name of following Christ. African theology has to be mindful of its past failings to communicate its ideals to the ordinary readers of the Bible. It is the role of theological reflections in the society to constantly challenge its members to live better. Any theological consultation has to avoid the very human tendency of letting theology become a justification for static social order that preaches

values, but does not challenge people to live them out. Thus, African theologians must be a guardian of true religion and should not allow it to become complacent. Both context and subtext of theology presume certain social, economic, and political values.

2. African Theological consultations have to challenge African Christians to live their faith authentically based on their cultural, social, and political context.

3. African theological dialogue is a methodology in which theological reflection takes place. African theology is political in the sense that it assumes and promotes a vision of African political, economic and social life, a notion of the fully human life, and the concrete social and economic tools to sustain this life.

African theological consultations guard against theologians who pull a trick of cunning, winning in theory or in advance, as if Christianity gets us off the hook of acting in the world. Some theologians wrote about how people ought to live their lives without really living life themselves. African theological consultation is critical to those who take the articles of faith and develop them rationally within their minds, instead of seeing how they should be lived out in the current African context.

African Theologians usually connect with the suffering of the African people, making theology to feel the claim of the relatively deprived members of the society within its own technical theological discourse. In other words, African theology runs the race. Through this way, African theologians live up to the task of theological consultation exhortation of giving an account of the hope that is in Christian theology.

Conclusion

It is urgent that African theological consultation has to re-build the African cultural, economical, social, and political ruins from the destroyed infrastructures to broken societies. This is the task of this consultative theological discourse taking place in this conference of African theologians. It is our view that African theology, like other theologies, predominantly remains an intellectual exercise. It is a theology of theologians, by theologians, for theologians'. It is this kind of consultations that will make it a theology of the Africans, by the Africans, for the Africans'.

Thus, we believe that the task of African theological consultation today is to initiate a new perspective that can transform the social life, and to initiate a discipleship of equals and the eradication of mass poverty in the African continent. This helps African Christians to build an open society, which meets the needs of Africans and restores African humanity. This is the theology of responsibility in an African perspective.

An African theology of responsibility is the fruit of a genuine experience of God in Jesus Christ. It leads to a new life for others, and invites the faithful to assume responsibility for evangelization.

The African Christian theology of responsibility wants to strengthen the motivation of the poor to share and to care for one another in Small Christian Communities, with their eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. Their faith in him brings them to do justice. In a continent plagued with mass poverty, bad governance and Afro-pessimism, the Church as the family of God remains the anchor of hope. Hence, it ought to present a genuine experience of God to the people of Africa, children, women and men.

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