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African Christian Theology: A New Paradigm

by Timothy P. Palmer

Introduction

The last 50 years have seen a flood of material on African Christian theology. It has generally been assumed in this literature that there are two basic types of African Christian theology - inculturation theology and liberation theology. This assumption goes back to the 1970s, when these two theologies were defining themselves in relation to each other and in relation to "mission theology."

Even more recently the paradigm of these two types of African Christian theology has persisted. In 1993, Emmanuel Martey defined the issue in the title of his *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*.¹ In the same decade, the editor of *Paths of African Theology* assumed that inculturation and liberation are the "twin foci of theological reflection in Africa."² Charles Nyamiti believes that inculturation and liberation are the basic two types of African theology and christology.³ In 1994, Ngindu Mushete stated that the three types of theology in Africa are still mission theology, "African" theology and black theology or black South African theology.⁴ And in the last decade Peter Okuma is still of the opinion that Christianity in Igboland is still "Mission Christianity," with its focus on "the next world."⁵ (Obviously Okuma has spent too much time in European libraries.)

But the theological and ecclesiastical landscape has changed in the last decades. The existence and nature of so-called "mission theology" in Africa is no longer clear. Instead, the theology of the mainline churches in Africa has moved beyond its missionary origins.

This is clear if one considers the existence of non-formal theology as well as formal theology. Bulus Galadima has demonstrated the importance of non-formal theology in one's assessment of African theology.⁶ Non-formal theology

¹ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993).

² Rosino Gibellini, "African Theologians Wonder . . . and Make Some Proposals," in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. R. Gibellini (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), pp. 1-8 (6).

³ Charles Nyamiti, "Contemporary African Christologies," in *Paths of African Theology*, pp. 62-77 (64).

⁴ A. Ngindu Mushete, "An Overview of African Theology," in *Paths of African Theology*, pp. 9-26 (13).

⁵ Peter Chidi Okuma, *Towards an African Theology: The Igbo Context in Nigeria* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), p. 16.

⁶ Bulus Galadima, "Non-Formal Theology: A Case for Lay Involvement in the Theological Endeavour," in *TCNN Research Bulletin* 29 (June 1996): 4-14.

occurs any time an African - or a European or an Asian - preaches or prays or sings. Philip Jenkins and others have shown how mainline African Christianity has in fact developed its own distinctive theology, which is both non-formal and formal.⁷

It is our contention in this essay that the old paradigm of two types of African Christian theology is out of date. This essay argues that there are currently at least four basic types of African Christian theology today: inculturation theology, liberation theology, African evangelical theology and prosperity theology.

Inculturation Theology

Inculturation theology is a form of contextualization. The context into which the Gospel is placed in this case is usually the traditional African culture. The non-formal inculturation of the Gospel in the African context is as old as the African church. The preaching, praying and singing of African Christians throughout African church history are forms of the inculturation of the Gospel. Often these forms of inculturation are in the local African language.

But the formal inculturation of the Gospel into the African context began in the middle of the twentieth century. "The real starting-point of African theology came from a European Franciscan missionary in the Belgian Congo, Placide Tempels."⁸ In 1945 his *Bantu Philosophy* was published in French. But "the first African who can be called an African theologian was Vincent Mulago, a Catholic priest from the then Belgian Congo."⁹ The year 1956 saw the publication of his Ph.D. thesis in French on the "Bantu Vital Union." In the same year Alexis Kagame published his "The Bantu-Rwandan Philosophy" in French. That year also saw the publication of a collection of articles under the title *Des Prêtres Noir s'Interrogent*, or "The Black Priests Ask."

Formal African inculturation theology began in Francophone Africa, but Anglophone Africa soon followed suit. The 1960s saw a flood of materials on African Christian theology, both in French and English (European languages!) and by both Roman Catholics and Protestants. In 1969 the All-Africa Conference of Churches in Abidjan said, "African Theology is 'a theology based on the Biblical faith of Africans, and which speaks to the African soul.'"¹⁰ In the same year, Pope Paul VI said in the Rubaga Cathedral in Kampala: "An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and

⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The Faces of African Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸ Bénédét Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, trans. J. O'Donohue (Nairobi: Paulines Pub. 1992), p. 53.

⁹ B. Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, p. 53.

¹⁰ Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology-Adaptation or Incarnation?* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), p. 23.

spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favoured by the Church. . . . [You] may, and you must, have an African Christianity.”¹¹

The inculturation of the Gospel was done to make the Gospel relevant to the African situation. In 1983, Osadolor Imasogie wrote, “Christianity, for many Africans, remains a foreign religion. . . . It is only when incarnation takes place that Christianity ceases to be a foreign religion.”¹² Even Byang Kato advocated, “Contextualize without compromise.”¹³

But the results of this inculturation exercise have been mixed. At times the result has been pure syncretism or a return to African traditional religion. Gabriel Setiloane said that, “we have learnt nothing new about religion from the missionaries. . . . But we Africans are bringing something to Christianity: a view of Divinity much higher, deeper, and all-pervasive.”¹⁴ Bolaji Idowu concluded his book on *African Traditional Religion* by praising a “faithful remnant whose loyalty to the religion of their forbears will continue steadfast.”¹⁵

I maintain that there is both irresponsible and responsible inculturation. When our culture is placed above the Gospel, then we have syncretism, which is a mixing of the incompatible elements of two or more religions. But when the Gospel is placed above the culture, transforming the culture, then responsible inculturation is possible. But in the end, after 50 years, what has inculturation really produced? Tersur Aben maintains that African contextualization and inculturation have yielded meager results. He says, “Africans contribute quite minimally to biblical theology.”¹⁶ He concludes: “Many African theologians now concede the failure of enculturation to yield viable African Christian theology.”¹⁷

Furthermore, African culture is changing rapidly. African culture is becoming more urbanized and westernized. Many of young people are far removed from the traditional African religion. A young Birom student of mine recently said that he doesn’t know traditional Birom religion. He grew up in a Christian church in the urban setting of Jos. His culture is that of urban Nigeria - iPods and iPhones, the internet, go-slows, unemployment, Muslim-Christian

¹¹ A. Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, p. 20.

¹² Osadolor Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1983), pp. 23-24.

¹³ Byang Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1985), p. 38.

¹⁴ Gabriel Setiloane, “Where Are We in African Theology?” in *African Theology en Route*, e. K. Appiah Kubi and S. Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), pp. 59-65 (63).

¹⁵ Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), p. 208.

¹⁶ Tersur Aben, *African Christian Theology: Illusion & Reality* (Bukuru: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2008), p. 130.

¹⁷ T. Aben, *African Christian Theology*, p. 172.

tensions, corruption and survival. This culture is far removed from the traditional African culture of ancestors and sacrifices and mediators.

Liberation theology complains that inculturation theology neglects the pressing social issues in our society. Desmond Tutu said, "I fear that African Theology has failed to produce a sufficiently sharp cutting edge."¹⁸ Tutu also said, "African theology will have to recover its prophetic calling."¹⁹ More harshly, Bénézet Bujo said: "The theology of inculturation, so often preached triumphantly in African churches, is a pompous irrelevance, truly an ideological superstructure at the service of the bourgeoisie."²⁰ It would be wrong to write off inculturation theology in these terms. But it must be admitted that often inculturation theology is simply a form of comparative theology.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology, in contrast, is a form of contextualization that places the Gospel in the contemporary African setting. Instead of focusing on the traditional African culture, liberation theology is passionately concerned with rectifying the glaring injustices in African society. Liberation theology began in this continent in South Africa, taking the form of Black Theology.

The historical antecedents of Black Theology go back to the situation of slavery in the Americas. "The roots of Black Theology must in fact be traced to . . . the arrival of the first African slaves in the seventeenth [and sixteenth] century. The subsequent history of Americans of African origin . . . is the raw material of what we now call Black Theology."²¹ But "black theology as an academic concern can be dated from July 31, 1966 when the National Conference of Black Churchmen issued a statement asking power and freedom from the leaders of America [and] power and justice from Negro citizens." In 1969, "James Cone published *Black Theology and Black Power*, which marked the formal inauguration of Black Theology."²²

In the 1970s Black Theology came to South Africa. In 1972 *Essays on Black Theology* was published in Johannesburg but was banned by the government before it reached the bookstores.²³ In the 1970s Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak were leaders of the Black Theology school of thought.

¹⁸ Desmond Tutu, "Black Theology and African Theology-Soulmates or Antagonists," in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 36-44 (43).

¹⁹ D. Tutu, "Whither African Theology?" in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. E. Fashole-Luke et al. (London: Rex Collings, 1978), pp. 364-369 (369).

²⁰ B. Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, p. 66.

²¹ John Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History. Vol. 1: 1966-1979*, ed. J. Cone and G. Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), pp. 379-84 (379-80).

²² J. Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology," p. 379.

²³ J. Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology," p. 383.

But John Mbiti accuses Black Theology of reductionism. He wrote, "What I view as an excessive preoccupation with liberation may well be the chief limitation of Black Theology. . . . Black Theology cannot and will not become African Theology. . . . Black Theology hardly knows the situation of Christian living in Africa, and therefore its direct relevance for Africa is either nonexistent or only accidental. . . . African Theology is concerned with many more issues, including all the classical theological themes, plus localized topics."²⁴

In the subsequent years, liberation theology moved beyond racial issues. Socio-economic liberation has become a major concern of liberation theology. Allan Boesak even accuses James Cone of reducing liberation theology to the racial issue. Instead, Black Theology should focus on total liberation. "It focuses on the dependency of the oppressed and their liberation from dependency in all its dimensions - psychological, cultural, political, economical, and theological."²⁵ For Bénézet Bujo the main problem is "the mass poverty of Africa." 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."²⁶ Jean-Marc Éla supports Bujo's call for economic liberation.²⁷

There are other forms of liberation theology in Africa. Feminist theology is an example. Mercy Oduyoye, for example, focuses on the unique situation of women in Africa, including their oppression.²⁸

Liberation theology is a theological response to the problems of poverty and injustice in African society. Liberation theology is a cry for justice. Liberation theology stands in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus Christ himself. Unfortunately, liberation theology has often been one-sided. Too often liberation theology focuses only on the socio-economic liberation of the person, neglecting the need for spiritual salvation. Allan Boesak is an example of this. For him the will of God is "liberating the oppressed," not the sinner. His "total liberation" includes theological liberation but not spiritual liberation. His discussion on righteousness deals with Jesus' "kingly justice" but not Paul's forensic righteousness.²⁹ Tersur Aben observes: "Conceiving African Christian theology as simply the liberation of Africans from their suppression under Europeans [or, Africans] has the negative effect of reducing Christianity to mere sociopolitical religion."³⁰

²⁴ J. Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology," pp. 381-83.

²⁵ Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), p. 144.

²⁶ B. Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, p. 66.

²⁷ See Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985).

²⁸ Mercy Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," in *Paths of African Theology*, pp. 166-81.

²⁹ A. Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, pp. 142, 144, 146.

³⁰ T. Aben, *African Christian Theology*, p. 39.

African liberation theology is a contextualization of the Gospel into the context of injustice and poverty within Africa. It is a cry for justice in our unjust world. We must recognize the presence of massive corruption and injustice in many Christian countries and states on this continent. Africa desperately needs justice. But this should not be done to the neglect of the liberation of the individual from the guilt and effects of sin.

African Evangelicalism

Many scholarly works on African Christian theology neglect African evangelicalism as an African Christian theology. Yet this is the dominant form of Christianity in large parts of Africa. African evangelicalism has also developed its own distinctive theology. Evangelicalism is a Christian theology that takes seriously Scripture as the Word of God. Christian evangelicalism assumes the full authority and reliability of the Bible, the divinity of Christ, the satisfaction theory of the atonement, the need for conversion, and the obligation to evangelize the world.

Early missionary theology in Africa was by and large evangelical. Early missionary theology preached the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to heaven. But this theology tended to be individualistic and other-worldly. Salvation was for the individual believer in heaven above. Early missionary theology tended to neglect this present world. The kingdom of God for them was the church. Therefore Christians should not get involved in politics since politics was worldly. Christianity was a Sunday religion. Christianity was about conversion of the soul, not the body.

In contrast to early European and American missionary theology, African evangelicalism is now much more interested in this world. Contemporary African evangelicalism has put the Gospel into the modern context of poverty, suffering, unemployment and disease. African evangelicalism believes that Jesus is the answer to these problems. It is thus necessary to believe in Jesus as one's personal Savior. Faith in Jesus will guarantee eternal life in heaven. But faith in Jesus will also provide solutions to problems on this earth. African evangelicalism believes in miracles today. Early missionary theology believed in miracles in the time of Jesus but was less clear about miracles today. African evangelicalism believes in the power of prayer and the real possibility of miracles in our Christian life today.

Paul Gifford writes: "The popular Christianity we encountered [in Africa] ... was not concerned with a renewed order or any 'new Jerusalem', but with a job, a husband, a child, a car, an education, a visa to the West. It was about succeeding in this realm." He says that the missionaries taught hardship in this life in exchange for happiness hereafter. But "the missionary legacy has vanished with scarcely a trace, for it is terrestrial rewards that feature so

prominently in African Christianity today.³¹ Philip Jenkins calls this new evangelicalism *The Next Christendom*. For Jenkins, the Anglican Communion in Nigeria is a good example of current African evangelicalism.³² Jenkins feels that this new evangelicalism is global, extending beyond Africa. Pentecostalism is a big part of African evangelicalism. But the example of the Anglican Communion in Nigeria reminds us that not all of African evangelicalism is Pentecostal. Even though Pentecostalism has entered the mainline churches, African evangelicalism is broader than Pentecostalism.

This African evangelical theology also believes in the reality of the spirit world. While liberal European theology thought that spirits did not exist, early evangelical missionary theology taught the reality of good and bad spirits in the Bible times. But African evangelicals speak of the reality of good and evil spirits today. African evangelicals teach the power of Jesus to defeat the evil spirits in our present context today.

This new evangelical theology is an indigenous form of African Christian theology. Often it is non-formal theology. It is an African contextualized theology distinct from inculturation theology, liberation theology or missionary theology. African evangelicalism, like liberation theology, is concerned with societal problems in the African context. But while liberation theology looks for structural solutions in society, African evangelicalism tends to look for individual or personal solutions. Liberation theology wants to transform society; African evangelicalism wants to transform individual lives.

Prosperity Theology

Prosperity Theology is a major African “Christian” theology that is usually neglected in the academic textbooks. Often Prosperity Theology is wrongly joined together with African evangelicalism. Since Prosperity Theology is so dominant in Africa, it needs to be treated as a separate African Christian theology. The context of this contextualized theology is again the modern African context. The context is contemporary, often urban, Africa with its social and economic problems of poverty, unemployment, school fees and barrenness.

Prosperity Theology holds to some of the same presuppositions as African evangelicalism. It believes in the power of prayer and the possibility of miracles. It believes in the power of Jesus to meet the daily needs of individuals and to overcome evil spiritual powers. But Prosperity Theology differs significantly from African evangelicalism in that it assumes that every Christian has a right to be prosperous. Prosperity Theology assumes that God

³¹ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 339-40.

³² See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

will make every Christian prosperous if the believer does the right things.³³ It assumes that a faithful Christian will be rich and that poverty is an indication of lack of faith. But this is not Scripture's teaching. Despite the general truths of the Sinai covenant in Deuteronomy 28, righteous people sometimes suffer. The book of Job makes this clear.

Prosperity theology is a form of what Martin Luther calls the theology of glory. Theologians of glory focus on one's own prosperity instead of the prosperity of the other person. But for Luther, the theology of the cross is the theology of the *agape* love that Jesus taught and exemplified. Sometimes this *agape* love will result in personal suffering. The theology of the cross offers salvation through justification by faith that manifests itself in a life of *agape* love to one's neighbor.³⁴ Prosperity theology is a syncretistic form of Christianity, a deviation from African evangelicalism. Usually it is a non-formal theology, but since it is so prominent in Africa, it should be included as a distinct type of African Christian theology.

Conclusion

Christian theology in Africa is contextual. But the African context is diverse and always changing. The traditional African culture is not the same as our modern African context. Inculturation theology attempts to put the Gospel into the traditional African context. Sometimes this effort is successful; but sometimes it results in syncretism. Liberation theology, African evangelicalism and Prosperity theology all address issues in our modern African context, especially the issues of survival in a difficult socio-economic context. But their solutions differ. Liberation theology stresses social justice; evangelicalism emphasizes the power of prayer; Prosperity Theology believes in personal prosperity.

Christian theology in Africa should be biblical, holistic and relevant. Theology should give an answer to our sin and guilt before God. But theology should also be relevant to our personal and social needs. Inculturation theology reminds us of our traditional African roots. Liberation theology reminds us of the concern for justice. African evangelicalism reminds us of the power of prayer and miracles. We need responsible contextual theology. But we should guard ourselves against theologies that distort the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ.

³³ See Peter Young, "An Evaluation of Prosperity Teaching," in *TCNN Research Bulletin* 43 (March 2005): 4-15; Femi Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel* (Bukuru: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2011).

³⁴ See Timothy Palmer, "Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross in the Nigerian Context," in *TCNN Research Bulletin* 48 (Sept. 2007): 4-12. See also www.tcn.org/publications.

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