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needs to be more research and theological reflection to identify uses of the Qur'an which may not be afflicted with such problems and which may be compatible with the evangelical objective. Above all, those engaged in Muslim evangelization need to heed the call of Walter Kaiser to join evangelical theologians in what he calls a "hermeneutical reformation," if the whole enterprise of Muslim evangelization is to avoid getting bogged down in the morass of relativity.

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Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy

Paul Bowers

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For those interested in Christianity in Africa, and especially for those interested in evangelical Christianity in Africa, it would be hard to overemphasize the significance of Byang Kato's *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975).

Byang Kato was a young Nigerian theologian of unusual ability and vitality, with a profound concern for the continuing growth of biblical Christianity in Africa. In this study he has focused on what he takes to be major theological pitfalls threatening the very survival of such Christianity on the continent. His thesis is that a pernicious syncretistic universalism is being promoted, almost unnoticed, within African Christianity. He seeks to call the evidence for this development to the attention of African Christians and to show how far it departs from true biblical teaching.

It must be said at once that Kato is by no means opposed to a legitimate contextualization of the Christian message in Africa. To the contrary, he says that an indigenous theology is a necessity. To fail to recognize—as some have—that this is fundamental to Kato's theological perspective is to fail to understand the man. I well remember Dr. Kato igniting a large evangelical congress in Nigeria, at the conclusion of a notable address, with the ringing appeal: "Let African Christians be Christian *Africans*!" He wanted a Christianity that was, as he puts it, "truly African and truly biblical".

It is to the second element of that prescription, the biblical element, that Kato directs attention in *Pitfalls*. Kato begins by describing factors which are proving conducive to the emergence within African Christianity of a syncretistic universalism. He singles out the theological issue of the relation of African Christianity to Africa's traditional religions as that feature of the current trend which he wishes especially to explore. An overview of traditional religions is then furnished, made more vivid and concrete by a careful description of the religious beliefs and practices in which Kato himself was reared, namely those of his own tribe, the Jaba of Nigeria. (The chapter on Jaba religion is of independent value as an addition to the descriptive literature on African traditional religions.)

The central section of *Pitfalls* contains an examination of the writings of two prominent African theologians, John Mbiti of Kenya, and Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria, and of major pronouncements from the influential All Africa Conference of Churches. Kato seeks to expose those elements from these three sources which either explicitly or implicitly promote a positive syncretistic assessment of the worth of African traditional religions for Christian faith and practice in Africa today. At the same time Kato subjects such elements to a systematic critique from a biblical perspective.

Throughout his analysis Kato is careful to emphasize that it is entirely consonant with biblical teaching to recognize that African traditional belief possesses some authentic knowledge of God. But he is adamant that submission to the authority of Scripture is incompatible with such further prevalent notions as that in African traditional belief an authoritative revelation is available to the Christian, or that in traditional religious practice a legitimate worship is being offered to God, or that traditional religions are in some sense salvific. The traditional religions of Africa “highlight the cry of the human heart, but the solution lies elsewhere”.

Kato concludes with the proposition that African Christianity is today faced with a critical challenge very similar to that faced by the Church of the first centuries, namely how to maintain the uniqueness of the Gospel in a milieu suffused with religious relativism, where the pervasive sentiment is that all religious roads lead eventually to the same goal. Then in the Mediterranean world and now in Africa, Kato says, the appeal of a syncretistic universalism is pressed upon the Church, not only by external force and persecution, but as well, and more insidiously, by deliberate accommodation promoted by leading intellectual groups within the Church. In such circumstances Kato wishes to “sound an alarm” and to recall the Church in Africa to a vital biblical Christianity.

A ‘MAIDEN EFFORT’

And what ought one to make of Kato’s analysis? When in the preface of *Pitfalls* the book is described as a “maiden effort,” we are offered, I believe, in that phrase a basic clue for assessing its true character and significance—and that in three respects. (1) *Pitfalls* is not Byang Kato’s magnum opus. Kato was not yet forty when he died in a tragic drowning accident at Mombasa, Kenya, only months after the publication of this book. This was his first major publication, a reworking of his doctoral dissertation. Those who knew him best felt that a maturing of reflection, a sharpening of perception, a broadening of awareness, a mellowing of style, were all still very much in progress. This initial contribution should be judged, therefore, as precisely that, with all the freshness, the angularity, the limitations, which one should expect in a young man’s first book. To be sure the analysis is not always accurate, the polemic not always just, the demonstration not always persuasive, the organization not always clear. This is only to be expected. Indeed at his death Kato was already in process of revision. *Pitfalls* is to be taken not as a final word but as a first word, a promise of what might have come had Kato been spared. As such, it is an outstanding achievement.

(2) But even more important for the proper assessment of Kato’s *Pitfalls* is the realization that it is a “maiden effort” in the theological activity of African evangelical Christianity. One may of course find earlier contributions from various African evangelicals, but as often as not these were addressed to the issues preoccupying western missionary forces within Africa. *Pitfalls* represents the first sustained effort by an African evangelical to engage in the theological issues being debated in Africa by African theologians.

Many think indeed that Kato's most significant contribution to evangelical Christianity in Africa was his effort to awaken it to the necessity of becoming involved in the theological debate within Africa. He repeatedly charged African evangelicalism with "theological anemia," and energetically exploited his position as General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar to try to shift the pattern. He travelled and wrote and spoke constantly in the interest of an accelerated development of evangelical theological education at all levels in Africa. He deliberately sought out and encouraged young aspiring evangelical African scholars in their studies and work. He dreamed up programmes to stimulate greater theological involvement among evangelicals. And he himself undertook, with the publication of *Pitfalls*, an opening step in direct evangelical theological engagement in Africa. *Pitfalls* thus represents a substantive personal contribution within Kato's larger initiative to rouse evangelical African Christianity toward greater theological responsibility and involvement. This summons and vision may well prove Kato's most abiding legacy to evangelical Christianity on the continent.

It is important to observe, however, that *Pitfalls* should not be taken as Kato's intended paradigm for the theological task awaiting African evangelicalism. While Kato urged upon African evangelicals the importance of developing a positive African Christian theology, his one published book goes very little beyond a negative critique of certain pitfalls menacing such a venture. Kato doubtless would have argued, with reason, that this was an essential preliminary step, a ground-clearing exercise in preparation for the positive task. But he certainly saw the task as much more than merely polemics. And that he would himself have attempted to follow on with a positive contribution entirely fits the direction of his intellectual interests and inclinations at the time of his death. For balanced assessment, *Pitfalls* must be viewed within this wider context of Kato's vision for a positive evangelical theological initiative in Africa.

(3) It should come as no surprise that *Pitfalls* was not received everywhere with enthusiasm. No thoroughgoing critique of this sort ever is. Some reaction was vicious. A prominent religious newspaper in eastern Africa ran a review which called *Pitfalls* "alarmist in what it says and colonial in the perspective in which it is written." It went on to suggest that Kato, through miseducation, permitted himself to become the tool "in the preservation and protection of neo-colonial interests," and concluded with the charge: "There is a theological pitfall in Africa from which we must climb out: the reactionary evangelical theology which has a capitalistic birthright." In modern Africa those are powerful charges indeed. One theologian reputedly threatened legal action over certain passages in the book. When a reviewer for a leading Christian journal in West Africa unexpectedly submitted a warm commendation of *Pitfalls*, it was felt necessary to find and print a second sharply critical review on the facing page.

'TRULY AFRICAN, TRULY BIBLICAL'

When emotive reactions to *Pitfalls* have receded, valid criticism will certainly remain. But it would be a misfortune if mere criticism were all that remained. For, in addition to its role within African evangelicalism, Kato's book must be recognized as a highly significant "maiden effort" within the wider general theological debate in Africa.

If one peruses the literature of African Christian thinking over the past two decades, one will encounter the affirmation that African Christianity must be both authentically African and authentically biblical. To be sure not all would feel this way, or put it so precisely. But it is a definite and recurring theme. And yet almost without exception attention within the

general theological discussion in Africa has fixed upon the former element, on making Christianity authentically African. It is a worthy and necessary task, as Kato himself emphasized. But if African Christianity is not to lose its function as salt in the world, not to say its very soul, it must also direct unremitting attention to its rootage in the biblical traditions. So African theologians have asserted. The terms therefore in which the fundamental questions of contemporary African Christian thinking are posed demand a continuously nurtured orientation not only upon the query "Is it African?" but also upon the query "Is it Christian?" Yet in actual practice the debate has not accorded equal time to these two nodal questions.

Pitfalls in fact represents the first sustained effort in Africa to raise and pursue the latter question, through a systematic critique of contemporary African Christian thinking from the standpoint of biblical teaching. Whatever else one might wish to say, it is in this regard a ground-breaking work. It would be a pity therefore if general Christian thinking in Africa merely fixed upon flaws in *Pitfalls*. For *Pitfalls* represents a new direction in the theological debate, and, whatever the flaws, stands as a pioneering attempt in a critically necessary task for all true African Christian thinking. *Pitfalls* remains Kato's spirited challenge to African Christianity to move from theological complacency to theological responsibility and alertness, in the quest for a Christianity that is "truly African and truly biblical".

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Threats and Dangers in the Theological Task in Africa

Tite Tienou

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This article is a chapter in Tite Tienou's forthcoming booklet, The Theological Task of the Church in Africa, to be published by Africa Christian Press early this year. The Rev. Tite Tienou is a pastor with Eglise de L'Alliance, a Christian and Missionary Alliance-related church in Upper Volta, and the Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar. He is a graduate of Nyack College, New York, the Faculte Libre de Theologie Evangelique, Vaux-sur-Seine, France and is at present on study leave to complete his Ph.D. at Fuller Seminary. This perceptive and important base for understanding the issues in evangelical theology in Africa was first given as a series of lectures at the ECWA Theological Seminary, Igbaja, Nigeria. The booklet will be sold in evangelical bookshops throughout Africa and will be available in the UK from Africa Christian Press, 20 Bedford Road, South Woodford, London E18 2AQ, and in Australia from Emu Book