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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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for discerning these times? In relation to this, Liberation theologies apply their concept of the social origins of religion and the way in which religion as a social force can be manipulated for political purposes. The same is valid for popular religiosity. But for us Evangelicals a whole new set of questions is opened.

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# **An African Critique of African Theology**

ma Djongwé Daïdanso

*(Translated from French by Tite Tienou)*

## **I PRELIMINARY REMARKS**

### **A The Topic**

The critique of African theology is not an easy matter. The difficulty of the topic resides in its very nature, in the ambiguity and the ill-defined contours of the so-called African theology. There are some expressions which the most serious thinkers use without ever asking themselves about the reality involved. African theology is one of those expressions. We know what critique, theology and the adjective African mean. The word “theology” meaning discourse about God, study of God, or science of God, is easily understood. But, as soon as one adds an adjective (Western, African, American, etc) the expression becomes more difficult to understand. One must, in fact, determine the characteristics given to the experience by the adjective used.

In other words, when we speak of American, Western, European, White, Black or African theology, what do we mean? Can we establish precise and specific details which make theology theology in the general sense of the word but more specifically African and non-European?

### **B African Theology**

What is African theology? What are the traits which distinguish it from theology per se and from other local theologies? What is its content and what are the areas of its application? What makes this theology African? Theologians must elucidate such questions in order to give, if need be, a solid basis to this theology so that we may not build on sand. That is to say that when we speak today of African theology, we must admit that we are walking on quicksand and that we are speaking of a still ill-defined subject for most African church leaders. But, be that as it may, everybody speaks today of “African theology”. Obviously everyone uses the expression in his own way and gives it the meaning of his choice. This does not facilitate our task of critique which will necessarily be incomplete, but discussions and other papers will help to deepen it.

### **C Our Goal**

The idea of African theology, whether it is founded or not, whether [p. 64](#) one approves or disapproves of it, even if it is designated by inadequate and still ill-defined expressions, causes missionaries and national leaders alike to be on the run. As we are gathered as Third World theologians, we must refrain from “third-worldizing” the biblical theology which is dear to all of us. In this context, our aim will be to fully honour the Revelation of God. Our criticisms will therefore be directed at everything said about African theology which seems to us to undermine the supreme authority of the Bible, the infallible Word of God. It is not therefore a matter of appropriating the gospel of salvation in Christ for the benefit of the peoples of the Third World while excluding others.

We would not therefore cut ourselves radically from the theological legacy of the past and we would not ignore or neglect the theological attainments assembled and established by biblical christianity for centuries. I hope that, while we are reflecting together, we may be clear and precise in our language in order to dissipate any confusion or ambiguity so that the theology which will come out of our consultation over a short or long term, will not only be evangelical, not only a scientific endeavour of specialist theologians, but something practical, viable and immediately useful to the local churches which we represent and seek to help.

## II THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When we want to know what have been the sources of the so-called African theology, we can find at least three categories:

### A Oppression

1. *The Slave Trade*. This is an historical fact which has marked the course of the life of the African. He was considered to be and treated like an animal, like an instrument for production. He was reduced to the status of a slave and as such he was waiting to liberate himself one day.

2. *Colonization*. This is also an historical fact which has marked the African in the deepest part of his being. The Africans, members of a society with numerical superiority, were dominated and reduced to living in a society which became sociologically inferior and in the minority. The colonized was so pressed by his master that he was almost reduced to the status of non-being. He was then waiting for an opportunity to emerge. [p. 65](#)

3. *The behaviour of some missionaries*. This behaviour, because of its aggressiveness and its paternalism, is today discredited by many Christians. In fact some missionaries, fortunately not all of them, have, consciously or by ignorance, despised the people whom they came to win to Christ, as well as their values. These missionaries believed, in fact, that “in order to christianize, it was necessary to destroy every evil thing, a certain number of customs, the meaning of which was not readily apparent”.

One could also mention the text of [Genesis 9:20–26](#) which was interpreted as making Africans the descendants of Ham, the accursed. Let us note that the text is not only interpreted out of its context, but also that Jesus Christ has come to the world to remove the curse of man ([Galatians 3:13](#)).

Therefore, be it by their behaviour, be it by an exegetical or theological extrapolations, these missionaries have contributed to the preparation of the awakening of the Africans’ consciousness.

### B The Awakening of African Consciousness

1. *Negritude*. Negritude, developed in the 1930's, is an initiative to shake the ruler's yoke. One of its advocates, L. S. Senghor, presents its programme in the following way: "From this discovery, joined with the vision of 'the great events which unsettle the world', the national consciousness of colonized people had to come. I was about to forget, for Black Africa, the powerful leaven which was the discovery and the exaltation of Negritude: Negro-African values". Following this movement, those colonized by France, for example, ceased saying: "our ancestors the Gauls" and referred to their own ancestors. They began rediscovering their own culture, their own religion, their own languages, etc ... The spirit of this movement is present today in African countries. It expresses itself with an almost unhealthy affirmation of the African, a quest for identity, for authenticity, and for African soul and personality, leading here and there to cultural revolutions and to a movement of "back to the sources" which tends to revive and ascribe value to everything which is African.

2. *The years of independence and decolonization*. For the African who has been, for a long time, neglected and dominated, independence and decolonization come as a framework allowing him to regain the dignity of his being and to affirm his personality. Claiming his rights leads him to present himself as his master's equal. p. 66

3. *The maturity of the Church in Africa*. African Christian theologians rightly feel that, so far, they have lived a theology which they have not reflected on by themselves, but which the missionaries thought for them and brought 'ready baked' from their homes. Having become mature, African Christian theologians legitimately aspire to rethink theology for themselves. Furthermore, the Gospel penetrating African society more and more, is sometimes confronted with social and theological problems specific to Africa which need answers which may not always be apparent in a theology developed for the needs of another people or continent.

Is it mere coincidence to think with A. Vanneste that African theology began in 1960 during a meeting of theologians in Zaire, reflecting on the topic: "Debate on African Theology?" Since then articles, seminars, conferences and books have dealt with the topic.

It is in this three-fold situation of the oppression of the African, the awakening to the consciousness of his dignity and the desire of the African Christian theologian to express his maturity and to provide answers with the Gospel for problems which are specific to his people, that the idea of African theology takes its source and deepens its roots.

### **III ATTEMPT TO ANALYSE THE SO-CALLED AFRICAN THEOLOGY**

The so-called African theology is an idea which is still running its course. It is not yet a clearly established fact with a result which one can analyse and critique. For lack of such a result, we will satisfy ourselves with orientating our thoughts towards three tendencies which can now be seen in African theology.

#### **A Ethno-theology**

Ethno-theologians are those thinkers, either Christian or non-Christian, who have jumped on the band wagon of political claims in Africa and who want to include African religion in the list of African values. Generally they fight with all their might to make people believe that Christianity and colonialism, evangelization and colonialism were one and the same thing and that consequently white missionaries were only colonizers or, at any rate, they helped colonize Africa, through Christianity, their religion. But, so they think, in these times of independence and reviving of African values, it is also necessary to revive the traditional religions of African tribes and to develop from there a theology which would

be called African theology. Such a theology would have as its goal the stating of African p. 67 peoples' thought about God. It is not therefore a Christian, Evangelical or Biblical theology, but a theology of African Traditional Religions as one could speak of the theology of traditional religions of Europe or Asia, or of Islamic or Buddhist theology.

What should one think of this? We must first of all denounce the anti-missionary attitude. We must then recognize that Christianity does not pretend to hold the monopoly over theology as the science of God. The Scriptures teach us clearly that God reveals himself to all men. Therefore, throughout Africa and elsewhere people reflect on God outside of the Christian framework. We cannot refuse them the right to call their thoughts about God theology. Lastly, we would even say that more serious studies than those done so far on African Traditional Religions, will increase our knowledge of these religions and will help us to better communicate the Gospel to those whose mentality has been influenced by these religions.

Moreover, the use of the epithet African is worthy of comment; first because it is related to the word theology which is singular. We have at least the right to ask whether we should speak about *one* or *several* theologies in Africa. The question is not without importance and the way is open to investigation; secondly because the contents of theology here is African Traditional Religions, a kind of ethnotheology. In this case I would suggest that instead of African theology, we use the expression theology or theologies of African Traditional Religions to mean that it is not Christian theology.

It is here, more than elsewhere, that definition and the careful choice of terms acquire their importance. What is African theology? It is comforting to note that more recent articles and books, for example *African Theology En Route*, present efforts at clarification. Thus for many Christian theologians in Africa today, African theology is the reflection or thought of Christian theologians on God and his revelation. However, there is still a long way to go to establish the method, the principles and the presuppositions of such a theological enterprise on the part of Christian theologians in Africa. For they will have to walk on the bridge of the absolute of Biblical Revelation, on the rivers of the problems and religions of Africa as well as on the theological currents with their presuppositions and their *a priori* assumptions which exist in the world.

## **B Syncretistic Theology**

Syncretistic theologians are Christians, or people claiming to be Christians, who find themselves torn between, on the one hand, the politico-socio-religious analysis of the condition of the African and p. 68 the reality of the Christian fact in which they claim to take part and, on the other hand, between the unrestrained quest for African identity and the expression of an authentically African personality and their Christian faith. Not willing to sacrifice one or the other, they decide to weld them together, to mix them and melt them into one single thing. It is the result of this mixture in Africa which would be called African theology. In an equation that would be:

Christian + African Traditional Religions = African Theology.

Christian Faith + Animistic Faith = African Theology.

Let us note that for most of these thinkers Christianity is the religion of Europe, of the Whites. They therefore claim that the Christian faith deculturalized the African.

Obviously, such allegations already contrast very clearly with the liveliness of Christian faith which African Christians manifest and they express it joyously with the multi-coloured originality of Africa; it is not necessary to take time to refute them.

Some of these syncretistic theologians recognize the transcendence of Christianity but they blame it generally for having enslaved itself to European civilization of which it has

become a medium. Before returning to the critique of the equation established, let us note here that many European and American missionaries obeyed the command of the Lord Jesus Christ to go into all the world and to preach the good news to all creation. By obedience to this command, they have dared to go towards other cultures. It is unfortunate that some of them have brought more of their own culture, than they should have, to the people they had to evangelize. But an important question is raised here. Who among men, Europeans, Americans, Asians or Africans, is capable of deculturalizing himself even for the purpose of proclaiming the universal gospel of Jesus Christ?

It is a cause for rejoicing to see the Third World Christians in general, and those of Africa in particular, take part more and more in the missionary task. It is to be hoped that when they go to evangelize Europe, America, and elsewhere, taught by the example of European and American missionaries, they will not “third-worldize” but they will evangelize and give the example of a contextual behaviour so that the Gospel is not blasphemized because of them.

But let us come back to the equation: Christianity + Animistic faith = African theology. The operation of the addition (in whole or in part) reveals the relativistic philosophy which characterize syncretistic theologians. Their purpose is, in fact, to deny the unique and [p. 69](#) absolute characteristic of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. According to them, this revelation is not sufficient but it has to be completed by the revelations of other religions. Christianity therefore becomes a religion among others. Salvation is no longer necessarily found in Christ but it can also be found in other religions. The result of the addition is marked by partiality. For in the logic of the proponents of this position, in other words, the equation means:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Europe} + \text{Africa} &= \text{Africe} \\ \text{Westerner} + \text{African} &= \text{African} \\ \text{White} + \text{Black} &= \text{Black}\end{aligned}$$

The African then becomes the centre of his own theology. For the concern is to exalt the African and everything about him. Such a theology does not agree with the picture of the body of Christ which is a unity in diversity, without a party spirit, without racism and without tribalism.

In fact the real result of the addition, of this mixture of Christianity and the religious practices of Africa and elsewhere, is syncretism. Syncretism is “a religious system which tends to weld together several different doctrines”. Here is raised more particularly the problem of dialogue between Christianity and other religions. Is this dialogue possible? How far can Evangelicals go in dialogue with other religions? Can they avoid syncretism in the process of dialogue?

### **C. Evangelical Theology in Context**

There are sincere Christians who fully respect the revelation of God as well as the essential truths taught by the infallible Word of God. These Christians are concerned not only to maintain the purity of biblical doctrine, but also to live a life worthy of the Gospel and to fulfill their mission towards all those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as personal Saviour. They are therefore concerned to spread the Gospel throughout the world and to communicate it to all men without distinction of nationality, region, tribe, race or culture. For the Gospel of Jesus Christ is transcultural, that is, it reaches men of different cultures, the Word of God being sovereign to judge and purify any culture of the impurities of sin. The Gospel can then go through all cultures without being enslaved to any of them, without being corrupted by any of them and without giving superiority to any of them.



For Evangelical Christians, the revelation of God, the Word of God, is the absolute authority in matters of life and faith challenging men and women, habits, customs and cultures of men of all nations, as [p. 70](#) well as political, administrative and religious institutions established among peoples.

Evangelicals will therefore have a critical attitude toward their cultures, respecting in African habits everything which is not contrary to biblical faith and rejecting everything that is detrimental to the Word of God according to the recommendations found in Thessalonians I [5:22-23](#): “Examine everything, retain what is good; abstain from all evil”. The questions are the following: Is it possible to have an African theology which is biblically orientated? What are the dangers? Can one remain faithful to the Word of God and develop a theology which could be called African?

## **IV SOME CRITICAL REMARKS**

It is not possible to present an exhaustive critique in one single paper. I suggest here four areas of critique.

### **A Terminology and Definitions**

We will never repeat enough times that the so-called African theology is ambiguous at the present time. In Christian circles people have the tendency to believe that the word theology refers only to Christian theology. But analysis (see III above) has shown us that what some call African theology is nothing else than the theology of African Traditional Religions and, as such, it has nothing to do directly with Christian faith.

In the case of Christian theology, we suggest expressions such as “African Contextual Approach to Evangelical Theology” or “Evangelical (Biblical Christian) Theology in Africa”. At any rate, there should be no haste in this. African theologians must take time to reflect in a mature and biblical way and to propose, at the appropriate time, words and expressions with appropriate meanings.

For the time being, let us at least note that the present expressions and definitions seem to be admitted hastily and in a premature way; consequently they are not satisfactory. The precision of theological language will help everybody to see clearly.

### **B The Foundation**

Most of the promoters of the so-called African theology seem to have their minds so occupied with the situation of the African who lived and continues to live in misery, poverty and oppression that they make this human experience the basis of their theology. Founding African theology on a situation which can change, they leave it to [p. 71](#) open to perpetual change at the mercy of circumstances, and human situations and experiences. Man and his problems therefore become the centre of theology. Are we not on the road to humanism rather than theology?

But for us Evangelicals, the Bible is the absolute authority on which we must found all theological and ethical affirmations and formulations. There cannot be another foundation.

### **C The Contents**

Here we note an ejection, a relativization, and a reorientation of the contents of Biblical revelation. So:

Liberation, which, in the Bible, is first of all the liberation of man from sin, his fundamental problem ([In. 8:31-38](#)), takes another meaning in African theology. It is

concerned to liberate man, not first of all from his sin, but from his present oppression. The one who helps materially to alleviate misery or even militarily to remove the oppressor, becomes the saviour god of the oppressed. God Almighty is therefore dethroned and man is crowned in his stead. Jesus Christ, the only Saviour, the only Mediator between God and men, the only way leading to the Father, is relativized and downgraded to the level of human saviours and messiahs. There is an aspiration, a desire, to have African saviours and messiahs.

The so-called African theology wants to be original and independent, uniquely African. But can we ignore history? Moreover, many of those who speak of African theology take a contrary course. Their tutors are the liberal theologians of Europe. So, under the cover of so-called African theology, is it not liberalism which is subtly finding its way in Africa? It is also here that we see clearly the importance of Evangelical theology in Africa.

### **D Areas of Application**

It is here particularly that opinions differ. The fight is between those who believe that there is only one theology which is scientifically established for all and those who hold the opposite view. A. Shorter writes: "Until there is room, in the Universal Church, for an African theology, for African rituals and for church structures, which are African-inspired, African Christianity will never be a reality". The debate divides the proponents of African theology into two groups. "For the advocates of African theology, there must be africanization in all areas of the life of the Church and at every level of theological task". So T. Tshibangu thinks that "even at the level of scientific work ... one can rightly speak of African theology". But the Malagasy [p. 72](#) Ralibera admits an "African transculturation of Christianity, an effort to rethink Christian teaching in relation to concepts and categories which are peculiar to Negro-Africans, but at the level of scientific theology; he does not see any room for an African theology whatsoever". The debate can last. But more than a question of delimitation of areas, should we not see in the debate this attitude of demand and reaction which characterizes generally, the proponents of the so-called African theology? Someone has said: "Europe has christianized Africa; we must africanize Christianity". This means: "we have suffered this; let us react this way".

It seems to me that there is a problem concerning the goal. What is the real goal that African theology seeks to achieve? Be that as it may, we must give credit to all Christian theologians who have been aware of their frustration and of their theological task in Africa and who have worked so far. Let us hope that the result of the labours will not be lost, but will be taken up, clarified and perfected with respect for the Word of God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There are few ideas expressed but, above all, many questions. Such is the content of my report which seems to me to be in agreement with the stage reached by theology in Africa—that is, that it is still a theology seeking its way. If our reflections here in Korea help us make some progress, we will not have wasted either our money or our time.

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