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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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living.*

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and anthropology while devoting itself to an interpretative approach to the study of God, man and divine-human interaction.”<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, what relevance does this situation have for the Third World church? Very much indeed, for at least two reasons:

First, whether we want to admit it or not, the Third World church is the “daughter” or the product of the so-called “mother church” in the north. As children the Third World churches have inherited the North Atlantic theological mentality. Until a few years ago all we had was an imported theology, which was being applied around the world without any attempt to contextualize it.<sup>37</sup> p. 27

Second the difference between the political, economic, sociological and ecclesiological situation in the countries of the North Atlantic and the countries of the Third World, is as great as the difference between day and night. The contrast between riches and poverty, abundance and hunger, gluttony and starvation, is obvious. But in spite of these differences as members of the same body of Christ, the church, should not forget that our task is first and foremost missiological.

I agree with the northern theologians that it is high time that the Third World and North Atlantic theologians entered into a meaningful dialogue.<sup>38</sup> But I disagree with them in that we Third World theologians refuse to dialogue with them. I believe that Third World theologians are as anxious to dialogue as our North Atlantic counterparts are, but I believe that this dialogue will not be possible until the theologians of the North Atlantic experience what René Padilla calls “an epistemological conversion”. Then and only then will we engage in a meaningful dialogue.

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**Dr. Ismael Amaya teaches at Nazarene College, San Diego, California, U.S.A. p. 28**

# **An African Critique of Western Theology**

**Billy K. Simbo**

The topic under consideration is very extensive and challenging. One could pursue many possible angles of approach and points of emphasis, but time and space do not allow for a detailed, technical study. I have, therefore, chosen to give a non-technical, brief analysis. I will examine western theology purely from the perspective of a Third World person from Africa.

By western theology we mean the western Christian’s beliefs and formulations concerning God and man’s relationship with Him. We shall treat the subject under two headings. Under the first we will examine the origins and background of Western

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, page 110.

<sup>37</sup> In 1970, in the first consultation of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, in Cochabamba, Bolivia, Samuel Escobar dealt with this phenomenon in his paper “The Biblical Content and the Anglo-Saxon Trappings in Latin American Theology”, in *Occasional Bulletin*, §3, Oct., 1972.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance, “An Open Letter to Josée Miguez Bonino,” in *Christianity and Crisis*, March 29, 1976, in response to his book *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*.

Theology. Under the second heading we will examine what we see as the outcome of this Theology.

## THE ROOTS OF WESTERN THEOLOGY

Western Christians and their theology have, on the whole, failed to apply Christian principles to their societies. The edifices and institutions of Christianity are still there, but their marks on their social, political, economic contexts are often minuscule, if not in most cases absent altogether. Western society has, to a large extent, been portrayed by its Christian representatives as a “Christian” society but unbelief, as seen in secularism and materialism, can easily be found in this society upon casual examination. And these pagan value systems are rapidly being exported to Third World countries at alarming rates.

Because the context of western theology has its milieu in western culture, it will be helpful to begin this critique with an examination of western culture and how it has affected western theology. Without doubt, the key emphasis in western culture and the context that sets it apart in our world is its philosophical and empirical bent. Almost unanimously, Third World observers are struck by the philosophical orientation of western culture. This intellectual and scientific orientation forms the dominant characteristic of western society as we know it today. Later, we shall show how this cultural trait affects western theology. Descartes would express this mentality in the phrase “Cogito, ergo sum,” i.e., “I think, therefore, I am.”<sup>1</sup>

The westerner interacts with reality on a philosophical level. The p. 29 world views and cultures of the Third World do not generally have this interest, almost fascination, with abstract ideas and intellectualism.<sup>2</sup>

From where then did western culture and its theology get this philosophical orientation? The roots of this orientation can be traced back to Hellenistic culture. The Greeks were preoccupied with “knowledge” for its own sake and as an end in itself. For them knowledge was detached, impersonal learning.<sup>3</sup>

This interest is similar to western pursuits in education where each year hundreds of theses and dissertations are written that have no bearing on the realities of life. Plato’s *Republic* elevated philosophers to the top status in society. Although philosophy as an academic discipline does not patently exert such strong influence in western society today, we cannot help but observe that the mental or intellectual approach to life permeates every aspect of western culture. There is no other area in which this is so clearly displayed as in theology. A good proportion of western theology operates on such an abstract philosophical level that the average lay-person is often unable to understand what the theologian is saying. Also, pastors find that upon graduation from seminary they

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<sup>1</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse* (1596–1650), Part IV, p.26, quoted Collin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> We see this vividly demonstrated when one compares the concepts of heaven as held by western oriented believers and Third World oriented believers. The westerner will speak of heaven as a place of peace, love, joy, and contentment, which are all abstract concepts. By contrast, the Third World person will speak in concrete terms of food, friends, home, fruits, etc., which are all tangible realities to which he can relate. Compare his concept of heaven with the graphic description of heaven given by the Apostle John in [Revelation 21:9–22:5](#).

<sup>3</sup> See J. L. Leuba, “Know,” *A Companion to the Bible*, J. J. von Allmen, ed: (New York, 1959), p.221. For the African, knowing is more than just intellectual comprehension, it is experiencing.

have to leave behind their sophisticated theological discussions and concerns in order to deal with real-life situations in the parish ministry.<sup>4</sup>

We also observe that just as the discipline of theology has been affected by the discipline of philosophy, so theology has been influenced by prevailing philosophical trends.<sup>5</sup> An acquaintance with p. 30 church history of the latter Middle Ages underscores this point. Thomas Aquinas (The Angelic Doctor) and other theologians of his day used philosophical arguments to substantiate Christian truth. For them *Natural Theology* with its secular philosophical arguments provided the intellectual basis of the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

We are acquainted with western theologians today who have rejected supernatural realities because they did not conform to secular philosophical trends of the day. We are not advocating, however, that Christians should abandon their intellects or refrain from relating Christianity to philosophy. As someone has pointed out, "Theologians should be more than philosophical apologists. Their critical role should be one of evaluating the faithfulness of the church to her calling."<sup>7</sup>

Western theologians have tended to reduce Christianity to a mere "philosophy" understood only in terms of intellectual "belief;" that is, something to which one gives intellectual assent but which does not necessarily produce life-changing commitment. So far we have tried to explain the roots of western theology. This theology has come out of a rationalistic and intellectual approach to life. The context is scientific empiricism. Its modern roots can also be traced to the intellectualism and scholasticism of the Renaissance.

## THE RESULTS OF WESTERN THEOLOGY

As Third World Christians, we owe a debt of gratitude to western Christianity and its theology. We give thanks for many valid and costly contributions to the spread of the faith in the Third World made by missionaries and other workers from the Western World. They have enjoyed a substantial degree of success in many places because the original planting of the gospel and the immediate instructions in discipleship training were done by western missionaries. Western theology with its philosophical and intellectual emphasis has helped us to "be always prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls us to account for the hope that is in us" (1 Peter 3:15). Furthermore, western theologians have, in great measure, grappled with their cultural realities and have made the Gospel meaningful and acceptable to their cultures. However, this attempt to be meaningful and relevant has been abused, resulting in what could be described as "accommodating theology." P. 31

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<sup>4</sup> Western Christians are often amazed by the power to communicate of Third World preaching. This preaching is down-to-earth and employs real-life situations in story or parable form. (The same is true of Black preaching in the U.S.A.). Consequently, this preaching produces commitment and is the only kind of preaching that captures and holds the interest of Third World listeners.

<sup>5</sup> Brown says, "For good or ill (and all too often it was the latter) philosophical ideas entered the blood stream of medieval theology and this, in turn, affected the life and thought of Christianity in the later ages" (page 12). The same idea is expressed by Francis Schaeffer in *Escape From Reason* (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Brown, page 34, and also church history of the late 1300's and 1400's.

<sup>7</sup> "Organic Christian Faith," an unpublished class paper by Ronald G. Mitchell at New York Theological Seminary.

Our Christian faith is not mere “believism” but is based on sound historical revelation. So we thank our western brethren for their enormous contribution. The points that follow are, therefore, meant not to deride western theology or to condemn it as worthless, but to examine its out-workings in both western and Third World contexts. This will help us avoid the same mistakes and pitfalls as we formulate our own theology for the Third World.

If I were presenting a sermon or Bible study at this consultation, I would have expounded James chapter two which deals with the theme “faith without works is dead.”<sup>8</sup> Western theology has failed to deliver the goods it promises. The roots and context of western theology would seem to justify its failure to put belief into action. We may catalogue the failures of western theology as follows.

Western theology emphasizes the intellectual and theoretical. People who accept a set of beliefs are called Christians even though, in actual practice, these beliefs have no effect on their life styles. It had been assumed that western nations were “Christian” because the people in those societies professed Christian beliefs. We see now, however, that Christian principles do not actually dictate how most of these people live. Rather, secular culture shapes their lives and values. In most cases, western Christianity has generally conformed to secular culture. To a Third World person, this dichotomizing of personality is a major problem. This dichotomy often separates Christianity from western political, economic and social life. Third World peoples have often wondered where the theology and Christian principles of their western brethren were when they needed answers to burning issues such as slavery, racism, apartheid, economic and social exploitation and oppression of the masses. Western theology either became a silent by-stander or in many instances, such as slavery, racism, and apartheid, it was used to justify the status quo. Little wonder then that alternate systems of theology, with roots in the Third World, have been developed to try to find scriptural answers to social problems. Our faith *must* confront the issues of our society. Western theology has often lead to an “Ivory-Tower” mentality among theologians who live in their own world in the clouds while the real world struggles with problems as to what to eat, wear, and drink. Western theologians are busy discussing how many authors wrote the book of Genesis or are fighting over biblical inerrancy, while Third World Christians take every word in the Bible as inerrant. Are Third World Christians naïve [p. 32](#) or stupid?<sup>9</sup> No! We just begin with God and life realities and everything else is possible. But when theology begins with human reason, then God’s sovereignty is ruled out.

Western theology has failed to address the real issues which affect how a person lives out what he claims to believe. This theology has been silent for too long and has often been manipulated to conform to “the system”. No wonder people in western society have turned their backs on the established churches. We are seeing unprecedented rebellion amongst youth. They hear the creeds of western Christians and they also see their contradictory practices. As Third World Christians we should learn from their mistakes and learn quickly. The so-called “indigenous Churches” of Africa are thriving because they don’t dwell on catechism or creeds but their whole life is one entire religious continuum encompassing birth, marriage, sowing, growing, and harvesting.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> A good treatment of this point is by Columbus Salley and Ronald Behm in *Your God Is Too White* (Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (Doubleday, New York, 1970).

On the mission field, western theology has tended to be very paternalistic. It has failed to adapt to life situations and often makes unreasonable demands on people, rewarding only those who break away from their culture and become “westernized.” The failure of missionaries to develop indigenous churches is due, in part, to the fact that subjects such as cultural anthropology and social sciences were not considered relevant to mission work until the church growth movement underscored their importance. Previously, the goal was “to change the people” and make them “Christian” and “civilized.” Western Christianity was equated with “civilization.” As Third World Christians, we are grateful for the attitudinal changes of missionaries in this area which have led to greater results in winning people to Christ.

What then is the difference, if any, between western theology and Third World theology? The secret lies, as Mitchel has pointed out, in the Hebraic thought pattern of Third World Cultures. There are amazing similarities between the Old Testament world-view and cultures and that of Third World cultures, particularly African culture.<sup>11</sup> p. 33

For western theology to survive it must produce a new understanding of faith which places emphasis not on philosophizing and theologizing (there is a place and time for these) but on faith that can be translated into life styles that are distinctly Christian and God-honouring. We Third World theologians must learn from the mistakes of the past but avoid isolationism in our theologizing. At the same time we must also avoid the strong temptation to legalism which would lead to “works without faith.”

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The Rev. Billy K. Simbo is Principal, Sierra Leone Bible College, Freetown, Sierra Leone. p. 34

# An Asian Critique of Western Theology

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<sup>11</sup> The following are two of many possible examples: (1) Hannah’s suffering over her barrenness and the taunt of the other wife ([1 Samuel 1-2](#)) will be easily understood by women in Africa because similar situations are common in Africa. (2) The parable of the friend at midnight ([Luke 11:6ff](#)) arouses sympathy in the heart of a typical African because the sleeping arrangements in his home are similar.