

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 14

Volume 14 • Number 3 • July 1990

Evangelical Review of Theology



WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission [p. 195](#)

Stephen G. Brown delivered this paper to the Evangelical Theological Society's 41st Annual Meeting, in San Diego, California, in November 1989. It is reprinted by permission. p. 209

New Frontiers in African Theology

F. Burton Nelson

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One of the embarrassing realities of contemporary American life is the increasing paucity of geographical awareness about the world. According to a Gallup survey in 1988, only 57% of adults in the United States could locate England on a map. A poll in 1987 among high school students in Dallas disclosed that 25% could not identify Mexico as the contiguous border country on the south!¹ In still another survey, an international Gallup inquiry on geographical knowledge, Americans 18 to 24 years old scored lowest among the developed countries surveyed, well below young Mexicans whose overall level of education is considerably below that of the U.S.A.²

So acute has this problem become that a panel of governors warned that 'the economic well-being of the United States was in jeopardy because so many Americans are ignorant of the languages and cultures of other nations.'³ They recommended a school curriculum which would convey an international perspective and emphasize both geography and foreign languages. 'Global education' momentum is consequently rising in a number of states. Perhaps this momentum will be enhanced by the stated intention of George Bush to be known as 'the Education President'. Hope springs eternal among all concerned citizens.

Geographical considerations relate also to contemporary theology. The globalization of theology has become a profound fact of life which we theologians overlook to our impoverishment and detriment. This point was made fifteen years ago with precision and perception by African John S. Mbiti, and he has continued to underscore it from strategic ecumenical posts both in Europe and in Africa. His probing question concerns the implications for the future of Christian theology, considering that 'within our own lifetime the axis of Christendom will shift from the Northern to the Southern regions of the world ... the p. 210 new centres of ecclesiastical gravity'.⁴ He reports that many theologians of the younger churches are scandalized and affronted that Christian scholars in older Christendom know so little about churches in the Third World. He even suggests that with

¹ 'Global Issues Education', *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 20, 1989.

² *New York Times*, Feb. 27 and March 12, 1989.

³ *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1989.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, 'Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church' in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, edited by Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Paulist Press, 1976), p. 6. The essay was originally published in *Lutheran World* (xxi/3, 1974). Dr. Mbiti, a Kenyan, has taught in Uganda, has served as Director of the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Institute near Geneva, and is currently a pastor in Switzerland and a professor of missiology at the University of Berne.

the axis of Christianity tilting southward, there may be justification for considering moving the World Council of Churches headquarters from Geneva to Kinshasa and the Vatican to Kampala, together with the election of an African Pope.

Professor Mbiti reminds us that in the year 2000 there will be more Christians in Africa than in all of North America, more in Latin America than in Europe. Centres of the Church's universality may no longer be Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, Berlin, London, and New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa, and Manila. Mbiti is quite serious when he asserts that on the one hand, in a geographical sense, the church has become universal due to the great strides in Christian missions over the past two centuries. On the other hand, theological outreach has not matched this expansion; consequently, one-half of Christendom today lies 'outside the fenced cloisters of traditional theology'. Further, 'this theology is largely ignorant of, and often embarrassingly impotent in the face of, human questions in the churches of Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia, and the South Pacific. Thus the church has become kerygmatically universal, but is still theologically provincial, in spite of the great giants of theology.'⁵

The annual statistical data compiled by David Barrett in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* graphically supports the impression of shifts in the Christian population. This simple table 'tells it all':⁶

Africa	8,756,400	115,924,200	164,571,000	221,767,300	323,914,900
East Asia	1,763,000	10,050,200	16,149,600	80,101,500	128,000,000
Europe	273,788,400	397,108,700	403,177,600	408,087,100	411,448,700
Latin America	60,025,100	262,027,800	340,978,600	472,902,300	555,486,000 p. 211
Northern America	59,569,700	169,246,900	178,892,500	188,280,000	201,265,200
Oceania	4,311,400	14,669,400	16,160,600	17,866,000	21,361,500
South Asia	16,347,200	76,770,200	106,733,200	138,945,900	185,476,700

These impressive shifts over the last three decades of the twentieth century, especially in the continental areas of Africa, East Asia, South Asia, and Latin America, invite Christians to reckon with a new globalization of theology. To fail to do so is to deny the contours of theological discourse in our time.

This commentary constitutes a 'map' of sorts, delineating theological developments in Africa in recent years. The first section relates to South Africa, the second to the rest of

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ David Barrett, 'Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1989', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January, 1989.

the continent. By its very nature, this paper cannot be comprehensive. It can, however, offer descriptive glimpses of the theological ferment now prevalent throughout Africa. The third section cites a number of challenges and implications for Western Christians.

I. THEOLOGICAL FERMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH STRUGGLE IN SOUTH AFRICA.

More than eighty per cent of the people of South Africa hold membership in one of the numerous church bodies of the country—Catholic, Baptist, Nazarene, Anglican, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, Assemblies of God, Independent Churches, and others. The theological traditions of the centuries are represented in these varied ecclesiastical groups, each with its own history on South African soil.⁷ It is not necessary to rehearse here the background of the society in which these churches live—the pervasive and vicious social structure of apartheid. What *should* be rehearsed in this context is the undergirding of the system by the theology and convictions of those whites who control the country's economic, political and social power. A few reminders are sufficient—

—that South Africa is a professedly 'Christian nation', the 1961 Constitution stating that God has given the Afrikaners 'their own land';

—that the majority of Afrikaners believe that apartheid is God's will and that it has been his will for the races of humankind to be separate forever; [p. 212](#)

—that Dr. D. F. Malan, a Dutch Reformed minister and the first Nationalist Prime Minister in 1948, expressed the sentiments of many Afrikaners when he said:

Our history is the greatest masterpiece of the centuries. We hold this nationhood as our due for it was given us by the architect of the universe. The first one hundred years have witnessed a miracle behind which must lie a will and a determination which make one feel that Afrikanerdom is not the work of men but the creation of God;

—that white people, who represent just 16.9% of the population in South Africa, occupy and control 87% of the land mass;

—that Africans, who represent 74.7% of the population, are confined to 13% of the land;

—that the vast majority of the people in the land are not permitted to vote;

—that the draconian measures taken by the government to control and subdue the black population are reminiscent of the Third Reich and the twelve year reign of Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany.

It is no wonder that such iron rule suppression has spawned a church struggle that bears considerable resemblance to the church struggle in Nazi Germany five decades ago. New frontiers in South African theology have consequently emerged, many of which constitute challenges and insights for churches in North America.

⁷ Two useful historical summaries of South Africa's church scene are: Ernie Regehr, *Perceptions of Apartheid: The Churches and Political Change in South Africa* (Hearld Press, 1979); Marjorie Hope and James Young, *The South African Churches in a Revolutionary Situation* (Orbis Books, 1981).

1. A re-examination of the theological traditions represented in the churches, or a 'retrieving' of tradition⁸

The Dutch Reformed Church has for over three centuries held ecclesiastical and political power in South Africa. This power was solidified in 1948 with the victory of the Nationalist Party in the elections, which made apartheid official policy throughout the nation. The Church has sometimes been described as 'the Parliament at prayer', although it is not the established church of the nation. Afrikaner Calvinism, with its adoption of such Hebrew concepts as the chosen people, covenant, and messianic purpose, has sought to legitimize apartheid. The theological nuances of those espousing the separation of the races in South Africa are often missing in the media reports from that beleaguered country. p. 213

Among those leading a 'retrieval' of the Reformed tradition is Allan Boesak, whose name is identified worldwide with the anti-apartheid movement. An ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, he is Student Chaplain at the University of the Western Cape, Peninsula Technical College, and Bellville Training College for Teachers. He is currently president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Dr. Boesak's book *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition*⁹ is a dynamic critique of that perversion of Reformed Christianity which has enabled Afrikaners to offer theological justification for apartheid. The principle of the supremacy of Scripture has been twisted so as to support racially divided churches, as well as a racist, nationalist ideology. The Reformed principle of the Lordship of Christ over all of life has been denied so as to warn the churches and Christian leaders to 'keep out of politics'. Boesak recalls that John Calvin possessed a concern for social justice and that none of its is reflected in the policies of the Afrikaners who claim to be his spiritual descendants. They have never attended to Calvin's perspective on human solidarity: 'The name neighbour extends indiscriminately to every man, because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship ... To make any person our neighbour, it is enough that he be a man'.¹⁰ Even Abraham Kuyper, who is often cited by Afrikaners to support their rigid apartheid, separatist policies, must be rescued from revisionists. These words, spoken by Kuyper in 1891 to the Christian Social Congress, do not sound like Afrikaner theology:

When rich and poor stand opposed to each other, Jesus never takes his place with the wealthier, but always stands with the poorer. He is born in a stable; and while foxes have holes and birds have nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head ... Both the Christ, and also just as much his disciples after him as the prophets before him, invariably took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury, and *for* the suffering and oppressed.

Allan Boesak, then, is a clear and articulate voice in South Africa, and throughout the world, aiming to retrieve the Reformed theological tradition in its pristine power, liberating it from the hands of the distortionists. His language is unequivocal and challenging: p. 214

Beginning with our own South African situation, we should accept our special responsibility to salvage this tradition from the grip of the mighty and the powerful who

⁸ 'Retrieving of traditions': A useful phrase by John W. de Gruchy of the University of Cape Town, South Africa. See his *Theology and Ministry in Context and Crisis: A South African Perspective* (Eerdmans, 1987).

⁹ Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition* (Orbis Books, 1986).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

have so shamelessly perverted it for their own ends, and let it speak once again for God's oppressed and suffering peoples. It is important to declare apartheid to be irreconcilable with the gospel of Jesus Christ, a sin that has to be combatted on every level of our lives, a denial of the Reformed tradition, a heresy that is to the everlasting shame of the church of Jesus Christ in the world.¹²

A similar 'retrieval' movement is evident also within the Lutheran Church in South Africa. Manas Buthelezi, bishop of the central diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa and President of the South African Council of Churches, has been identified with the poor and marginalized for many years. He sees the Evangelical Lutheran Church as 'the main custodian of an historical confessional heritage. It is uniquely in Lutheranism that the acknowledged standard-bearers of a confessional tradition are the poor themselves, at least on the level of all the structures of leadership.'¹³

More comprehensive statements about the 'retrieval' frontier within African Lutheranism are found in a new collection of essays, *Theology and the Black Experience: The Lutheran Heritage Interpreted by African and African-American Theologians*.¹⁴ These writings emerged from an historic conference of Black Lutherans at the University of Zimbabwe, co-hosted by the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

Two exemplary contributions are offered by Simon S. Maimela, 'Justification by Faith and Its Continuing Relevance for South Africa' and 'The Twofold—Kingdom—An African Perspective'. Throughout the symposium there is an incisive critique of those European and American Gospel versions of Lutheranism that have muffled the prophetic edge of the liberating Gospel.

2. Black Theology

A second frontier in the South African theological scene has been the evolution of a distinctive Black Theology, accompanied by a strong liberation motif. An early collection of essays by the Black Theology p. 215 project of the University Christian Movement appeared in 1972, but were immediately banned by the South African Government. The original editor, Sabelo Ntwasa, was placed under house arrest while the material was at the printers. Subsequently, the collection was published in England under the title of *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, edited by Basil Moore.¹⁵

The impact that Black Theology has had in South Africa has been much greater than in the rest of the continent and in recent years has had a powerful impact on the formation of *The Kairos Document*. From my own perusal of the literature, reports, and personal contacts, I would heartily agree with Matthew Schoffeleers of the Netherlands who writes that 'it is no exaggeration to say that in less than twenty years, Black Theology has drastically altered the theological map of South Africa'.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹³ For a recent statement by Bishop Buthelezi on the church struggle in South Africa, see the interview with him published in *One World*, November, 1987, pp. 4–5. The bishop has also been a contributor to the Black Theology debate in South Africa.

¹⁴ Eds. Albert Pero and Ambrose Mays, Augsburg Publishing House, 1988.

¹⁵ *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, edited by Basil Moore, was also published in the United States by John Knox Press, 1974.

¹⁶ Matthew Schoffeleers, 'Black and African Theology in Southern Africa: A Controversy Re-examined', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. xviii, No. 2., June 1988, 99–124.

One of the shapers of the Black Theology movement has been Allan Boesak. His *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Power*¹⁷ is parallel to the rise of Black Theology in the United States in its early stages, especially as represented by James Cone; it also parallels the Latin American theology of liberation. Boesak, the first Black from the South African Reformed tradition to earn a doctorate in theology, perceives Black Theology as the theological reflection on the historical situation in which they live and on their struggle to be free. The gospel itself, he insists, needs to be liberated because it has been held in captivity by those who would reshape it for their own purposes and preferences. Familiar notes with current liberation theologies are prevalent: God is on the side of the oppressed; God in Christ is the Divine Liberator; liberation has socioeconomic consequences; the Bible must be read from 'the underside of history'.

A strong theological influence on Allan Boesak has been Dietrich Bonhoeffer. An integrity of discipleship, costly grace, the ethics of responsibility, the Church for others, the suffering God and suffering people, resistance to oppression and evil—all these Bonhoefferian p. 216 themes can be found throughout the sermons, addresses, lectures, and writings of Boesak.¹⁸

3. The Kairos Document

A third frontier in South African theology is a version of *status confessioni*, culminating in the publication of *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Churches*,¹⁹ and describing the three predominant theological systems within the churches.

For twenty-five years there has been a running conversation about the parallels between the Nazi Third Reich and the order of society entrenched in South Africa.²⁰ An integral segment of the discussion has been the church struggle in Germany, with particular relation to the Barmen Confession and the establishment of the Confessing Church, as well as the underground resistance movement to the tyranny of Hitler.

The Kairos Document, signed by 156 church leaders in 1985, both lay and clerical, serves as a window into the state of theology and the churches in South Africa. Signatories included a broad spectrum of Christians—Catholic, Anglican, Congregational, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed Mission Church, A.M.E., Belydendekring, Assemblies of God, Moravian, N.G. Kerk, Baptist, Independent, Evangelical. The opening paragraph conveys the sobriety of the statement:

The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived. South Africa has been plunged into a crisis that is shaking the foundations and there is every indication that the crisis has only just begun and that it will deepen and become even more threatening in the months to come. It is the *KAIROS* or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the church.²²

¹⁷ Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Power* (Orbis Books, 1977).

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that Allan Boesak gave the keynote address in June, 1988, at the quadrennial gathering of Bonhoeffer scholars in Amsterdam. The address will shortly appear in the published collection of papers by Eerdmans.

¹⁹ *Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Eerdmans, 1986).

²⁰ Three helpful volumes on the relation of the Nazi State to the modern South African state are: Brian Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (Penguin Books, 1964); John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (Eerdmans, 1979); Sipo E. Mzimela, *Apartheid: South African Nazism* (Vantage Press, 1983).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

We as a group of theologians have been trying to understand the theological significance of this moment in our history. It is serious, very serious ...²¹ p. 217

The Kairos Document has been read in a number of South African languages and circulated widely among the churches, especially the nineteen affiliate bodies of the South African Council of Churches. Three theologies are described in the Document, each of them represented throughout the country.

State Theology—the theology of the South African apartheid state which is ‘the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism, and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonizes the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience, and passivity’.²³ It totally misuses biblical texts such as [Romans 13:1–7](#), makes a travesty of law and order, freely labels anyone who rejects its theology as ‘communist’, and claims God as the God of the state.

Church Theology—a theology which in a limited way criticizes apartheid, but which adopts the theme of reconciliation as the key to resolving the problems of the social order. Unfortunately, what is envisaged is not a reconciliation based on true justice or repentance. It is short on sociopolitical analysis and long on privatist and individualist spirituality.

Prophetic Theology—a theology that is described as biblical, spiritual, and pastoral, as well as prophetic. It is strong on social analysis, identifies with the motif of Oppression in the Bible, is unafraid to cite the state as tyrannical, calls for a change of governance, encourages hope in the midst of conflict and struggle, and challenges to action.

One can discern the theological legacies of both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth in the contours of the prophetic theology section. In the growing movement toward a South African Confessing Church, an awareness of a *status confessionis*, a call to obedience and faithfulness in the midst of a critical church struggle, the shadow of Barmen is clear and perceptible.

This challenge has been notably phrased by John de Gruchy:

The Church in South Africa is engaged in an intense struggle, a struggle within itself, and a struggle against an unchristian ideology and political system. It is a struggle for its own soul, a struggle against racism, exploiting militarism; a struggle against compromising the Lordship of Christ over the Church; a struggle for the true unity of the Church which transcends human barriers; a struggle for social justice and peace.²⁴ p. 218

II. THEOLOGICAL FERMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTINENTAL AFRICA

As one moves northward from South Africa to the rest of the vast continent, it is apparent that there is no monolithic category of ‘African Theology’. In fact, the past twenty years has seen a spirited debate about the meaning and application of the phrase itself. A reasonable and simple description by John Mbiti of Kenya commends itself: African

²¹ *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Eerdmans, 1986).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁴ John W. de Gruchy, ‘Spirituality of the Struggle’, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. V, No. 1, 1984, p. 56.

theology means 'theological reflection and expression by African Christians'.²⁵ Professor Mbiti suggests that there are three main areas of African theology today: written theology, oral theology, and symbolic theology. It is the written theology which has grown by leaps and bounds over the past two decades, rendering obsolete the observation which Mbiti made in 1967: 'The Church in Africa is a Church without a theology, without theologians and without theological concerns.'²⁶

As one surveys the mountain of books, journal articles and reports that have been accumulating over the past quarter century, in general it can be observed that Black Theology, as developed in South Africa, is not nearly so prominent elsewhere. The liberation theological motif, while present, does not play such a visible role. What is prominent and predominant is a movement variously described as indigenization, Africanization, inculturation, acculturation, and adaptation. The overriding concern is to establish that the church can be profoundly African and Christian at the same time.

To illustrate this integrating theme, I have selected four contemporary theologians—an Anglican from Kenya, a Methodist from Nigeria, a Catholic from Uganda and Tanzania, and a Presbyterian from Ghana—so that by focusing on their contributions, we can glimpse something of the theological ferment now in process.

John S. Mbiti

Professor Mbiti, born in Kenya, educated in Uganda, the United States and England, has been characterized as 'easily the most outstanding among Protestant theologians in the field of African Theology'.²⁷ His **p. 219** writings have been prolific,²⁸ although he has not written a systematic theology. Mbiti belongs to a company of African theologians who regard the traditional religions as a preparation for the gospel, and see Christianity as a fulfillment of African religions. He has drawn significant parallels between the world of the Old Testament and the African milieu.

Mbiti is clear that the Scriptures monitor the relationships of Christian theology to the traditional religions and to African philosophy. This sentinel role will insure protection against syncretistic tendencies and a distortion of the *kerygma*.

As long as African theology keeps close to the Scriptures, it will remain relevant to the life of the church in Africa and it will have lasting links with the theology of the church universal. African theologians must give even more attention to the Bible than is sometimes the case. As long as we keep the Bible close to our minds and hearts, our

²⁵ John Mbiti, 'The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology', *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July 1980, p. 119.

²⁶ Cited in David J. Bosch, 'Missionary Theology in Africa', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 49, Dec., 1984, p. 19.

²⁷ Justin S. Upkong, 'The Emergence of African Theologies', *Theological Studies*, 45 (1984). John Mbiti's writings include: *Poems of Nature and Faith* (East African Publishing House, 1969); *African Religious and Philosophy* (Anchor, 1970); *Concepts of God in Africa* (Praeger, 1970); *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford, 1971); *The Prayer of African Religion* (Orbis, 1975); *African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology* (WCC, 1977); *Contemporary Theology* (WCC, 1977); 'Christianity and African Culture', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, (October, 1979).

²⁸ 'The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religions', *Christian Century* (August 27, 1980); 'The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology', *Occasional Bulletin* (July 1980); *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Oxford, 1986).

theology will be viable, relevant, and of lasting service to the church and glory to the Lord to whom be honour, dominion, and power unto the age of ages. Amen.²⁹

Professor Mbiti is not entirely sympathetic to the development of Black Theology in either South Africa or the United States. African Black Theology, with its foundational theme of liberation, appears to him to lack an adequate biblical basis. He critiques American Black Theology for its exaggeration of the theme of liberation, its divisive tendency to use the term 'black' with reference to God and Christ, and its tendency to emphasize the theme of oppression to the exclusion of joy in the Christian faith.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye

Professor Oduyoye is a native of Ghana, educated in both Ghana and p. 220 England, and has taught theology at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Since 1987 she has been Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches; she is a member of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order and has been the first woman and the first African to serve as president of the World Student Christian Federation. Her writings are impressive.³⁰

Professor Oduyoye has been an active participant in both the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians (EAAT). As an African feminist, she conceives her mission to be 'to call attention to missiology and to African women's potential for contributing to the theological enterprise'.³¹ She frequently calls her male colleagues to task for not comprehending that 'sexism is part of the intricate web of oppression in which most of us live'.

Of major importance is Professor Oduyoye's insistence that African traditional beliefs and practices must be seriously and respectfully considered by the Christian theologians. One such belief concerns the African recognition of the divine spirit in nature. Another is the African belief that past, present, and future generations form one community. This includes the role of ancestors in the life of Africans. Still another is the sense of wholeness of the person, affirming that there is no separation between a soul and a body, nor between the sacred and the secular. Liturgical practices, including those of the African independent churches, may enrich Christian life—drumming, dancing, extemporaneous prayer, cultic roles, music.

Utilizing African religious beliefs in Christian theology is not an attempt to assist Christianity to capture and domesticate the African spirit; rather it is our attempt to

²⁹ John Mbiti, 'The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology', *Occasional Bulletin* (July, 1980), p. 122.

³⁰ 'Feminism: A Pre-Condition for a Christian Anthropology', *African Theological Journal*, No. 3, 1982; 'The Eucharist As Witness', *International Review of Mission*, April 1983; 'Reflections from a Third World Woman's Perspective', *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, Eds. Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella (Orbis, 1983); *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, (Orbis, 1986); 'Birth' in *Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, edited by John S. Pobee and Barbel Wartenberg-Potter (WCC, 1986); *With Passion and Compassion*, edited with Virginia Fabella (Orbis, 1988).

³¹ Deane William Ferm, *Profiles in Liberation: 36 Portraits of Third World Theologians* (Twenty-Third Publications, 1988), p. 55.

ensure that the African spirit revolutionizes Christianity to the benefit of all who adhere to it.³² p. 221

Aylward Shorter

Professor Shorter, born in London, educated at Oxford and Rome, has taught in Uganda, Tanzania, and East Africa. His writings evidence a deep concern for 'Inculturation Theology', a continuing interaction between Christian faith and culture.³³ In this intensive endeavour, he argues for a serious exchange between Christianity and African Traditional Religions rather than for each system to be self-isolated and incapsulated. Such dialogue, he insists, is part of God's own expectation and plan. The whole church is called upon to listen to the voice of African theologies—wholeness of life, symbolism, community. The bizarre title of his volume, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*, should not mislead us about the sobriety of his approach to healing and wholeness. Shorter espouses a traditional Catholic view of ministry, of ecclesiology, and of the sacraments, yet pleads for an openness and a wide-ranging pluralism in expressions of faith.

Kofi Appiah-Kubi

A Presbyterian lay theologian, Kofi Appiah-Kubi, born in Ghana, educated in Ghana, England, and the United States, is a passionate advocate of a 'theology of the people'. Not as prolific a writer as other African theologians, he has nevertheless contributed richly to the growing body of theological literature.³⁴

Appiah-Kubi is convinced that African Christian theology must take to the streets. It must not be content with the theologies of Barth, Rahner, 'or any other Karl', but rather explore 'what God would have us to do in our living concrete condition'. The orienting principle in our theological task should be 'the poorest of the poor in our p. 222 communities'. In the midst of poverty and hunger, disease, ignorance, oppression, discrimination, torture, rejection, dehumanization, our theology must reach toward liberation and fulfillment for all. Indeed, 'it should be a theology of the people, by the people, and for the people. The task is too precious, urgent, and important to be left only in the hands of church functionaries or theologians, thus the involvement of men and women of all walks and stations of life is called for. It should be office theology, farm theology, market theology, street theology, household theology, etc.'³⁵

Appiah-Kubi adheres to two characteristics of African native religions—the importance of healing and the reverence for ancestors—and applauds their incorporation into the faith and practice of some of the independent churches, or what he prefers to call

³² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology', in *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader*, edited by Deane William Ferm (Orbis Books, 1986), p. 247.

³³ Professor Aylward Shorter's bibliography is as extensive as any other African Theologian: *Chiefship in Western Tanzania* (Clarendon, 1972); *African Culture and the Christian Church* (Chapman, 1973); *African Christian Theology: Adaptation or Incarnation?* (Orbis, 1977); 'African Traditional Religion: Its Relevance in the Contemporary World', *Cross Currents*, Vol. 28, No. 4; *Priest in the Village* (Chapman, 1979); *African Christian Spirituality* (Orbis, 1980); *Revelation and Its Interpretation* (Chapman, 1983); *Jesus and the Witchdoctor* (Chapman, 1985); *Toward A Theology of Inculturation* (Orbis, 1988).

³⁴ Kofi Appiah-Kubi: 'The Church's Healing Ministry in Africa', *Contact*, No. 29, World Council of Churches, 1975; *Psychology, Religion, and Healing* (Ghana University Press, 1979); Editor, with Sergio Torres, of *African Theology En Route*, Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, 1977, Accra, Ghana (Orbis, 1979). See especially his 'Indigenous African Christian Churches: Signs of Authenticity'; *Man Cures, God Heals* (Osman and Co., 1981).

³⁵ 'Preface', *African Theology En Route*, p. ix.

‘Indigenous African Christian Churches’. The indigenization of worship—the naming ceremony, symbols in weddings, participation of women, drums, hand-clapping, dancing, etc.—may also contribute to the richness of corporate Christian life.

III. CHALLENGES AND INSIGHTS FOR WESTERN CHRISTIANS

The frontiers of theology in Africa have been irretrievably expanded over the past twenty years, alongside those in Central and Latin America, and in Asia. Globalization of theology has become a veritable reality, keeping pace with the shifting of the geographical centres of the Christian Church. It would be a grievous travesty to dismiss these theological developments as late twentieth century expressions of faddism. They do constitute challenges and selective insights for Western theological eyes.

Here are several possibilities to ponder, and to reflect upon as we move towards the twenty-first century.

1. The first challenge is to hear what our brother and sister theologians are saying, both to their own contextual situations, and to the wider Church and world. In truth, these are among the cutting edges, or the growing edges of contemporary theology. The written theologies, especially of continental Africa, are in early stages and have a pilgrimage into the future that is yet to be disclosed.

2. We may also sense the challenge of theology taking sides, as is so compelling in the midst of the agony and the pain of South-Africa. We [p. 223](#) can scarcely be unmoved when hearing these eloquent words from John de Gruchy of Cape Town:

It is virtually impossible for the academic Christian theologian in contemporary South Africa to remain true to his or her vocation without being involved in some significant measure in the struggles of the church and the wider society ... Christian theology loses its integrity and identity as both Christian and theology the moment it is divorced from contextual reality and praxis and becomes an idealistic construct floating in academic abstraction or confined to an ecclesiastical ghetto.³⁶

The signal emerging from South Africa, and from elsewhere in continental Africa, is a plea for a theology that is involved in the struggle for justice and freedom.

3. An auxiliary challenge is to respond in solidarity with the oppressed in South Africa; as well as in other areas of the continent where poverty and hunger, despair and suffering reign. The accompanying *Kairos Covenant* is an option to consider.

THE KAIROS COVENANT

An Initial Response of the U.S. Christians in Solidarity with the Oppressed in South Africa.

This is a time of crisis and judgment—a *Kairos*—for U.S. Christians. God Speaks to us today. In the prophetic cry of our sisters and brothers in South Africa we hear God’s Word.

It is a call for confession and repentance for our participation in the sin of apartheid; it is a call to conversion, and we give thanks for it; it is a call to understand and act in solidarity with all who are bound by the chains of apartheid; it is a call to speak out and take action against the fears, the rationalizations, the paralysis, the policies, the structures—whether

³⁶ John W. de Gruchy, ‘Doing Christian Theology in the Context of South Africa, or God-Talk Under Devil’s Peak’, inaugural Lecture, University of Cape Town, South Africa, September 17, 1986.

in church or society, whether in the U.S., South Africa, or elsewhere in the world—against all that contributes to continuing oppression.

The grace of God compels us to respond. The *Kairos* of these times judges our nation as well. U.S. administration support of the government of South Africa is mirrored by a domestic policy, grounded in racism, that imposes economic apartheid. Its victims are disproportionately men, women, and children of colour. The majority of our people remain insensitive to the p. 224 poverty and oppression of their sisters and brothers throughout the world and unaware of our complicity in the systems that inflict and prolong their suffering.

Called to a new radical commitment by the *Kairos* of our times and in active solidarity with our oppressed sisters and brothers in South Africa, we pledge in the name of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected:

to tell the truth about the evil of apartheid in South Africa and work to abolish it; to offer increased support to the people of South Africa in their own struggle; to support the peoples of southern Africa who are victims of U.S. and South African political, military, and economic destabilization; to speak the truth of justice in our churches; to fight racism, sexism, and economic injustice in our own society; to challenge our social and political structures to send clear messages to the South African government: we will not as a nation tolerate apartheid, and we will encourage all other nations to stand together against it; to renounce a self-centred U.S. lifestyle that exists at the expense of blacks in South Africa and other oppressed people in our country and throughout the world.

The hour is late. The judgment of God is at hand. God asks us to love more deeply, work more diligently, risk more courageously. We give thanks to God for this opportunity to help prepare the way for the gift of a reign of justice in which the present signs of death will be swept away and God's new Life will fill us all.

4. The continuing quest to relate faith to culture, the probing questions of indigenization and inculturation, largely in continental Africa, but to some degree in South Africa, have profound relevance for the ongoing mission of Christ's Church. How do we hear the new sound of respect for African traditional religions? Does the motif of ancestry arrest our interest? Is John Mbiti right when he speaks of 'the God already known'?

5. If there is a church struggle being waged in South Africa, and in other parts of the African continent, how would we depict our own Western struggle? In the light of the giant issues we face—racism, sexism, nuclearism, militarism, homelessness, AIDS, violence, affluence, boredom, political corruption, educational impotence, health care costs, sexual promiscuity—is ours not also a church struggle with breathtaking consequences?

I have no doubt about the answer.

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The Gospel