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AFRICAN AND CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND MINISTRY¹

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The following paper presents personal thought and reflections and is not to be understood as representative of current African scholarly opinion.

Professor Andrew Walls describes the importance of theological education and ministry in Africa for the future of global Christianity:

Christian history indicates that searching, fundamental scholarship arises naturally out of the exercise of Christian mission and especially from its cross-cultural expression.

What happens there [Africa, Asia and Latin America] will determine what the Christianity of the 21st and 22nd centuries will be like [...]. The quality of African and Asian theological scholarship, therefore, will not only be vital for Africans and Asians and Latin Americans; it will help to determine the shape and quality of world Christianity.

In a word, if Africa, Asia and Latin America do not develop a proper capacity for leadership in theological studies, there will for practical purposes be no theological studies anywhere that will be worth caring about.²

AFRICA AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN MISSION

It is now generally recognised that the principal theatres of Christianity have shifted from the western heartlands to the southern hemispheres of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Rough statistics suggest that in 1900 more than 80% of all Christians lived in the West. By 2000 the number

¹ Most of the material that follows and forms the bulk of this article is published in an article I wrote entitled 'Theology and culture; An African Perspective' in Bowers, Kapolyo, Olofinjana (eds.), *Encountering London* (London: London Baptist Association 2015), pp. 68-79. Subsequently, I gave the paper at the gathering of *Missio Africanus* in Oxford in July 2017. The material is used here with appropriate permission and references.

² These quotations, taken from an unpublished paper by Professor Andrew Walls, are reflected in Chapter 5, entitled 'Africa in Christian History' in Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

of Christians in the south had risen to about 50%. In a hundred years' time, if the Lord has not returned and if the trends continue as they are now, more than 80% of all Christians will be from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The quality of interaction between the Gospel and the cultures of Africa will determine the quality not only of African Christianity but also of world Christianity. If the quality of that interaction is healthy, we can confidently expect great things; new theologies, Christologies, mature and attractive standards of Christian living, a clear Christ stamp on the African Church and of course the growth of the universal Church into the full stature of Christ. However, if the quality is poor, then we can look forward with fear to 'distortion, confusion, uncertainty and hypocrisy'.³

Rwanda was the cradle of the East African Revival. By 1990, Rwanda was one of the most Christianised countries in Africa. But in 1994, for one hundred days 'Spirit-filled' evangelical Christians hacked to death other 'Spirit-filled' evangelical Christians because they belonged to a different tribe! I understand that in one country in Sub Saharan Africa criminals will pray before engaging in their evil nefarious activities. If they are successful, they will tithe their ill-gotten gains to the Church. It is said that some pastors drive around in new cars donated for their use by such criminals! I sincerely hope this story is apocryphal and riddled with embellishments. But if it has any element of truth in it then it is a serious sign of the kind of potential gross corruption that could so easily infect the Church. However, there is a window of opportunity to do what is right. I do not know how long that opportunity will last. But like most finite things, I know it is limited. Therefore let all, particularly African Christians, who have interest in the development of world Christian mission, grasp this opportunity with both hands and work to develop an empowering and attractive theological methodology, a liberating hermeneutic, to enable people of African descent to think, speak and write theologically in forms that arise from the deep wells of the African soul not mediated in a second hand manner through Western intellectual categories to satisfy a culturally Eurocentric theological agenda.

Fifteen years ago, shortly after I took over as the principal of the All Nations Christian College in Ware, Hertfordshire in England, I noticed the lack of black British students not only at All Nations but in many of the evangelical theological institutions in the United Kingdom. At that time, these colleges in general and All Nations in particular, could easily fill their student places with European and third world students. Third

³ Quotation taken from the same unpublished paper referred to in note 2 above, but see in addition Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 119.

world students were hindered by lack of funds and increasingly in fortress Europe, lack of visas. But black urban British students were a rarity. Perhaps the picture has changed in the intervening years since I left the college, although I have my doubts. At that time, I took the opportunity to consult with two of the leading black Christians in the country; Joel Edwards, then head of the Evangelical Alliance UK (EAUK) and Mark Sturge, then head of the now defunct African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance (ACEA). In response to my quest, both gentlemen were quite clear that the curricula of our colleges offered nothing to the Black British Urban experience. The colleges and the theology they espoused, were irrelevant to the experience of life of this particular people group. Why?

I once gave a paper at a gathering of the German Evangelical Missionary Alliance in which I suggested that 'there is no such thing as theology but only theologies' including enlightenment (European), feminist, womanist, liberation, black theology, African, Asian, etc. I suggested that there needed to be a revolution in theology similar to the one that took place in social anthropology when the idea of plurality of culture was introduced in contrast to the dominant concept of a universal singular culture.⁴ The latter dominated 19th century European thought and coupled it with imperialistic ideas of evolution, progress and development. Accordingly, a supposed continuum existed on which all ethnic groups could be located from the most primitive to the most civilised or cultured. Primitive ethnicities, mostly colonised peoples, were located towards the beginning of that line while the most civilised, represented by most if not all Caucasian peoples, were located towards the end of the continuum. I suggest that this situation or something similar exists in theology. My paper was put on a website for wider distribution. A few months later I had an email from an American missionary working in Japan who had seen my paper and taken issue with my basic thesis. He suggested instead that what Europeans, Africans, Asians etc. need is a biblical theology not 'ethnic' theologies. As I contemplated the contents of his email, I looked up to see on my bookshelf an international dictionary of pastoral theology and ethics. I flipped through it casually looking for an article on 'spirit or demon possession and pastoral practice'. I looked in vain. I suppose there must have been a reference to the subject under the article(s) on the Holy Spirit. But my point was that theologians from cultures that are not troubled in general by demon possession would not think to ask the theological questions that would deal with that subject. African pastors deal with demon possession regularly in their ministries. An inter-

⁴ See N. Rapport and J. Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 110.

national dictionary of theology would surely give them help in that area. But alas no, because the authors of the articles included were grounded in very different cultures from those represented in Africa. Every theology is culturally biased because it is developed by people who are contextualised in time and space.

But how did we get here and what should we do about it in regard to theological discourse in education and ministry?

DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY

Strictly speaking, theology, a word derived from two Greek words, *Theos* and *logos*, means a study of ideas about God, more particularly, the Christian God. Sometimes we use the expression the doctrine of God. This is certainly the sense in which the term was used by the early North African church fathers, who coined the phrase, in the City of Alexandria in the second century AD. These included Clement, Cyprian and Origen. But even Tertullian the second century writer and lawyer from North Africa spoke of theology as the study of the God of the Christians.⁵ As a matter of fact, systematic theology as a discipline of study originated in Alexandria, in Egypt.

Theology as a modern academic discipline was born with the founding of universities in the European cities of Paris, Bologna and Oxford. Originally the universities offered only four subjects: these included the arts, which was the entry programme for scholars. Then they would graduate to do medicine, law and theology. By the 13th century, theology was increasingly used to refer to the systematic study of Christian beliefs in general and not just the articulation of beliefs about God. The establishment of the discipline in universities drew a distinction between the much favoured and more academic theoretical and speculative study of theology, over against the practical subjects to do with the practice of churchmanship. Until relatively recently, practical theology, the practice in ministry arising out of the study of theology, was seen as a very poor relation within the faculties of theology.

With the onset of secularism arising from the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century in Europe and America, it was argued that theology needed to be free from any external authorities such as the church or even the creeds. This led directly to the dropping of theology from the faculties of universities in those countries with a strong secularist ideology. In those countries, like France and Australia, it has taken a long time before universities would admit theology as a bonafide academic discipline. The

⁵ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2007), pp. 6-7, 102.

more secular the countries became, the more likely that theology was looked upon with suspicion and excluded from public education at every level.⁶ In the United Kingdom, it is relatively recently, in the final quarter of the 20th century that university authorities have allowed Bible Colleges to offer degree programmes for their courses (CNAA or direct accreditation with established universities).

Objective theology, as taught in the universities, has several basic components: Bible, systematization, philosophy, history, pastoral and spirituality.

From my point of view, western theology as outlined above, is founded on biblical ideas, filtered through Greek philosophical methods, married to rationalism and the enlightenment ideology, focussed almost solely on an objective discussion of ideas (cognitive and informative), even if these ideas are about God. As a result two major weaknesses in the western theological enterprise have become apparent. These are silence and collusion; silence (the typical sin of an individuating culture) in the face of gross injustices suffered at the hands of the west by many colonised people and collusion with the whole western cultural, economic and political imperialistic agenda.

THEOLOGY AND THE IMPERIALISTIC AGENDA

The western theological enterprise was not just silent but positively encouraged the triangular slave trade in which upwards of sixty million Africans were displaced from their homelands and sold into chattel slavery or perished during the long voyage from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas. It was a Roman Catholic nation, Portugal, which first took slaves from the Congo in 1444 AD. The Protestant nations which eventually overtook Portugal in colonial expansion were no more concerned for the freedom and salvation of the Africans. They allowed economic interests to blind their sense of justice and mercy, righteousness and godliness. There were significant western voices of dissent (most notably John Newton, William Wilberforce, Thomas Fowell Buxton, etc.) but by and large the whole theological establishment had little to say to counter the injustices against black people and other people of colour; both African and Indian. The Baptist Union Great Britain (BUGB) issued an apology in 2007; a recognition of the Union's complicity (even if by silence) in the slave trade. It was also an acknowledgement of the economic benefits derived from such an inhumane business.

⁶ Ibid., 105.

In the year 2007, the National Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain made a public apology primarily to the Baptist Union of Jamaica and generally to black people. The apology was significant, not because the sins of the fathers were unfairly visited on the children as so many seem to think; that was not the issue. This generation of white Christians is not to be held directly responsible for the transatlantic slave trade. However, the tragedy of the connection with Africa made by the Iberian powers back in the middle of the fifteenth century when they first exported a few slaves from the Congo has come to dominate and haunt relations between black and white people for centuries. In those relationships white people have proved dominant and powerful in every way. This is a result of the slave trade and has serious continuing consequences for the way white and black people relate to each other.⁷ This is the crucial point.

J. H. Cone makes the point clear by saying, 'While I had not lived during the time of the legal slavery, its impact upon black life is still visibly present in the contemporary economic, social, and political [I would add theological] structures of the United States. Lynching is the most dramatic manifestation of the legacy of black slavery. Incidentally, lynching, a verb derived from the surname of Mr William Lynch, is not just the physical brutality connected with summary executions of black people at the hands of white racists, it is especially a way of sowing distrust among black people so that they can never trust each other but wholly trust their slave masters.'

The debilitating effects of the slave trade on Africa are easy to identify. Not only were the most able-bodied men, women and children taken, leaving older less able people, but the coastal lands and their hinterlands were turned into war zones as tribe fought tribe to capture slaves for sale to European slave traders of the time. Theology was silent; it did not seem to influence either Catholic or Protestant powers in their quest for more and more slaves to satisfy the seemingly insatiable appetite for labour of the burgeoning plantations and their slave traders, which in turn fed the ever-growing appetites of the nations' coffers back in Europe. The slave trade created untold wealth for the trading nations while despoiling the continent of Africa.

Again, with a few exceptions, the western theological establishment in Germany was silent or irrelevant over the slaughter of six million Jews in the Third Reich during the Second World War. With the exception of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was martyred for his opposition to the Nazi regime and Karl Barth, the majority of German theologians

⁷ Andrew Walls, 'Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1:1 (1998), pp. 5-6.

remained silent when this gross miscarriage of justice was committed by the Nazis.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, theology was too easily the handmaiden of the European colonial enterprise and all the problems of land acquisition and the wholesale dehumanisation of non-white peoples all over the world.

During the pre-colonial period white missionaries in places like Calabar, Zululand, Basutoland, Buluwayo in Zimbabwe, were strictly controlled by the local tribal political figures; Moshoeshe, Lobengula, Mzilikazi, etc. But during the high-water mark of colonialism (1880-1930) missionaries were part of the governing system. Undoubtedly there were many individuals who bucked the trend and espoused the aspirations of Africans and fought against the injustices that characterised the colonial rule (Cripps in Rhodesia, Frank Barlow in Kenya – a Scottish missionary turned land tenure expert who fought to give back land to the Kikuyu from the government and the Mission).⁸ But in general, the voice of the missionary enterprise and the voice of their theology were silent in the face of these gross miscarriages of justice!

Western cultural and therefore theological domination was particularly acute in certain parts of Africa, both Anglophone and Francophone. During the period of colonialism, the colonized were not encouraged to develop confidence in using their local languages and cultures for formal education, which tended to have been developed by Westerners for Westerners then adapted and re-packaged for the colonies. This Eurocentric approach to education, history, culture and intellectual development excluded the possibility of serious engagement with indigenous thought patterns, categories, idiom and indeed general concerns. This is especially true in countries in the areas ranging from East, Central and Southern Africa where white settler presence inculcated a near total abandonment of the local languages and their cultures for anything but personal and domestic use. The riches of African languages and cultures would not and did not form any serious part of educational curricula at either secondary or tertiary levels. As Gordon Molyneux observed, 'Imperial western values and concepts [...] were at one and the same time opening to African societies the intellectual and economic means of [modern] nationhood and also creating a universe where their traditional worldview found no place.'⁹ To the detriment of the African Church, this state of affairs has

⁸ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, p. 98.

⁹ K. Gordon Molyneux, *African Christian Theology* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993), p. 27.

been perpetrated even in the postcolonial era in life in general and especially so in the church and its theological discourse.

It is depressing to find many, perhaps even the majority, of educated sub-Saharan African Christian ministers preferring to preach or teach in their adopted colonial lingua franca instead of their mother tongues even when the context of such ministry, e.g. college, church, family funerals, is totally mono-cultural. Kalilombe, writing from the context of Malawi, emphasizes this point when he laments the dearth of grassroots theological reflection because 'the Christian masses tend to doubt whether they can do their own reflection on their faith'.¹⁰

Cone, writing from an African American context, makes a similar point when he says,

I think that black professors are still too captivated by structures of white thought and therefore cannot think creatively. What we think and how we organize our ideas are too much determined by our training at Union, Harvard, Yale and other white schools that imitate them. The academic structure of white seminary and university curriculums require that black students reject their heritage or at least regard it as intellectually marginal.¹¹

In apartheid South Africa, the doctrine of separateness and the designation of black people as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for white people were underpinned by the Dutch Reformed Church's (DRC) interpretation of certain biblical passages from the early chapters of the Book of Genesis (Genesis 9:24-27). They misinterpreted the curse on Canaan, traditionally understood to have been fulfilled in the subjugation of Canaan by Joshua, to be a universal curse on Canaan's father Ham and all his descendants, people of colour, for ever.¹² The demise of the Apartheid system of government in South Africa was in part based on a revision of this official doctrine of the DRC.

Perhaps, as Bediako states, it is for these and other reasons that western Christianity seems to have lost its vigour and has become 'dispirited [...] with declining numbers' year on year. Perhaps that is why, in God's economy, the centre of gravity of the Christian Church has shifted to the

¹⁰ Patrick Kalilombe, *Doing Theology at the Grassroots* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1999), p. 193. I would add African professional theologians and ministers to this assertion.

¹¹ J. H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), p. 76.

¹² Allen P. Ross in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), p. 41f.; contra Erich Sauer, *The Dawn of World Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), p. 75ff.

southern continents.¹³ This shift is the third in the history of the Christian Church. The first occurred in the first and second centuries AD. The shift from Jerusalem to Rome enabled the faith to survive the demise of the Jewish State, after 70 AD and especially after 135 AD when the Romans made it illegal for Jews to live in Palestine. Similarly, the shift from the Mediterranean basin to the northern European states enabled the Church to survive the invasion of Rome by the Barbarians. The Church will again be preserved from the ravages of rapid secularisation, even in theology, and pluralism in the west as it finds a home in the heartlands of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

REDEEMING THEOLOGY – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE READER AND HIS OR HER CONTEXT

Contextualisation is the theological movement that has caught the imagination of many people of the southern continents leading to such theological expressions as liberation theology, black theology, feminist and womanist (black women) theologies, and many others besides. Simply put, contextualization is the abandonment, by Latin Americans, black Africans, Indians, Asians, etc., of the western theological agenda; the traditional ‘marriage between theology or Christian reflection and western norms of thought and life’.¹⁴ The contexts are varied; Latin American liberation theology has been dominated by the economics of injustice in that part of the world. Black Theology has been dominated by black people’s fight against white racism and the injustices of white domination of black people especially in the United States and South Africa. Historical, economic, political and cultural contexts have become pivotal in the theological reflections that characterise what are pejoratively called non-western theologies. I must reiterate, *there is no such thing as theology; there are only theologies! There is no such thing as non-contextualised theology – all theologies, western theology included – are contextualised!*

Every one of these contexts needs to be reflected in the world-wide Church’s theological expression and taught as such in all our theological colleges. This has significant eschatological ramifications. In that day when the redeemed will be drawn from every tribe, tongue, language and nation, there will be a great multicultural mosaic to glorify the Lord.¹⁵ I fear that on that day a lot of us who have come under the influence of

¹³ K. Bediako, ‘Facing the Challenge’, *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1.1 (1998).

¹⁴ C. S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology* (London: Lutterworth, 1980), p. 4.

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), p. 540.

western theology will simply reflect a faded carbon copy of the imperial image of theology bequeathed to us by those whose intellectual developments took their cues from Aristotle and Plato but neglected the wisdom that built great empires like the Ashanti of Ghana, the Zulu of South Africa and Monomotapa of Great Zimbabwe!

Liberation theology, Black theology, Feminist and Womanist theologies, etc., are all in their contexts able to speak to each other meaningfully because of their basis – the self-disclosure of the triune God revealed in nature, the written Scriptures and supremely in the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

BLACK THEOLOGY – JAMES HARVEY CONE

Cone was troubled when he asked the question, 'How could I continue to allow my intellectual life to be consumed by the theological problems defined by people who had enslaved my grandparents? Since there was nothing in Euro-American theology that spoke directly to slavery, colonisation and poverty, why should I let white theologians tell me what the Gospel is?'¹⁶

Cone found his solution, his context, in the black struggle for liberation. Black theology is the marriage between Black Power and Christianity; an enterprise created and engaged in solely by black theologians struggling alongside their brothers and sisters for freedom from political bondage and cultural imperialism. The issue for him was whether the biblical Christ was to be limited to what he calls the prejudiced interpretations of the white scholars.¹⁷ At that time any attempt to speak positively with the gospel into the historic-political movements was anathema to any serious theologian who adhered to the divine revelation (although perhaps it is more accurate to say that the majority were just too scared to raise their voices of protest).

Cone was a man reborn! His theological reflections could no longer ignore the current violence against black people; the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, and the historic killings of so many blacks in the cities of the Southern United States, the slave ships, the auction blocks, and the myriads of lynchings.

When it became clear to me that my intellectual consciousness should be defined and controlled by black history and culture and not by standards set in white seminaries and universities, I could feel in the depth of my being a

¹⁶ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

liberation that began to manifest itself in the energy and passion of my writing. Writing for the first time became as natural as talking and preaching.¹⁸

‘When a person writes about something that matters to him or her existentially, and in which his or her identity is at stake, then the energy comes easily and naturally’.¹⁹ Cones’s rationale for writing theology, may well explain why there are very few truly significant black African contributions to theology. The African Bible Commentary, a remarkable achievement in its own way, although written by Africans including me, is in effect, with few exceptions, a Western document on account of the fact that all the authors were mentored by Westerners and all of us seem to have bought into the myth of objective theology of the Enlightenment. There are some remarkable exceptions like Samuel Waje Kunhiyop’s article on witchcraft in the context of Saul’s visit to the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28).²⁰ As we look to the future, it is imperative that all theological colleges end the division between Theology and Contextualised Theologies. There is no such thing as theology there are only theologies. All theologies however, have a common denominator for they derive from the triune God revealed in Scripture. On a practical level, this does mean all theological library holdings must include authors from non-western countries. It also means a determination where we teach in multicultural contexts, that we include on the faculties men and women who represent different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

For those of us who are African, we need the courage to move away from doing theology on the basis of what Bediako called, the ‘shifting sands of a borrowed culture’. God has kindly left tremendous deposits of his grace in every culture. Therefore, we need the confidence to develop the skills to think like Africans, to engage with Scripture like Africans, using African thought forms and categories even when we are writing and speaking in any of the universal languages of commerce and trade. Let me end with an example: Cleansing of widows is a funerary rite practised by many Zambian people in their cultures. Cleansing of widows or widowers takes place a few days or weeks after the death and burial of a spouse. Traditionally, this ritual involved in part sexual intercourse between the surviving spouse and a member (married or single) of the family of the deceased. The practice raises obvious questions of infidelity for Christians. Although sadly, apart from blanket condemnation of

¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹ Ibid., 51.

²⁰ Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), p. 374.

the practice, which is the easy thing to do, there is very little courageous and nuanced analysis of the practice; an analysis that could potentially prove useful to African Christian thought and practice. Underlying this practice of cleansing of widows and widowers are certain beliefs including an understanding that when two people marry the marriage is not just a physical union, it is a spiritual one. The respective spirits of the two-people involved in a marriage live in each other's bodies. Therefore, at death, the spirit of the deceased needs to be released from the body of the surviving spouse, to return to its people; hence the sexual intercourse. Note the understanding and belief that sexual intercourse is not just two bits of flesh rubbing against each other but that it is a deeply spiritual or sacred activity between two people in a committed relationship not only sanctioned by the families and society but binding the families involved. Surely this African belief and practice, albeit encrusted in centuries of sinful behaviour, harbours a deeply embedded even collective memory of a biblical view of sex and sexuality; sexual union is more than just physical it has deeply spiritual significance for good or ill (see Ephesians 5:32, cf. 1 Corinthians 6:15)? Similarly, the understanding that marriage is not just two people in physical union but that it is deeply spiritual for it is an exchange of the human spirit that binds two married people. Surely these taken for granted beliefs in Zambian culture are in line with the Bible's teaching on the nature of Christian marriage and foreignness of the ideas of marital infidelity and divorce. There must be a way by which African theologians could and should tease out these deposits of grace to help liberate them from these practices encrusted in sinful behaviour and use them to inform Christian teaching on the subjects of marriage, sexuality and death. The study of cultures is thus imperative in the context of theological study, especially so in the increasingly multicultural contexts in which we live out our Christian faith.

Returning to where I started, the intellectual energies released from this kind of study of the Bible which takes seriously the host cultures of each ethnic group, will forge new and inclusive ways of looking at the Scriptures to bring about what Andrew Walls calls 'the Ephesian moment'.²¹ Ways that will be attractive to all groups of people we seek to draw into the Kingdom of God.

²¹ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, p. 81.