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African theology

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AFRICAN THEOLOGY

The Development of Theological Thought in Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the late nineteen-fifties there was hardly any serious, documented attempt in non-North Atlantic countries to examine the theological methodologies underlying 'received theological formulations' in order to unearth the subterranean factors that shaped these theologies. This blindspot in the development of theological thought was nurtured by a subtle theological imperialism of the North Atlantic church which was the 'sending church', motivated by a legitimate missionary zeal to christianize the world. North Atlantic church theologians came to the erroneous but dogmatic conclusion that their understanding of God as revealed in Christ had an identical universal application in all human situations and conditions, irrespective of different world views, self-understandings and consequent cultural expressions of religious experience.

In holding that view, North-Atlantic church theologians inadvertently turned a blind eye to an historical, empirically verifiable truth, namely, that the Christian theology that came to them initially was hammered out in the encounter between the Jewish understanding of the Christ and the thought-patterns and views of the contemporary world. The testimony of church history is that, as Christianity spread to the gentile world, there was inevitably a conflict between the Jewish religious experience and expression and that of the Greek in the apprehension of the meaning of Christ and his gospel of salvation. This conflict resulted in several Church Councils convened to resolve the theological problems that were generated. The resultant theological formulations bear the marks of this symbiotic encounter which in turn was initially presented to the North-Atlantic church.

Its failure to remember this history, however, made it unconscious of the fact that the theological formulation which it was presenting to the 'receiving church' was not the formulation it received, but its own contextualization of that theology in its own response to the gospel in the light of its own philosophical, scientific and cultural self-understanding through the ages. The truth of this is substantiated by theological schools of thought, such as orthodox, neo-orthodox, liberal and liberation varieties. This is another way of stating that, in the words of Schreier, 'while the basic purpose of theological reflection has remained the same, namely, the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in the light of their own circumstances',¹ concerted attention has always to be paid to how those circumstances shape human response to the gospel. Such an understanding will help theologians of a given world view and cultural milieu to reflect existentially on the meaning of the gospel in the light of their own experience and self-understanding. In other words, we should never forget that all theological reflections are triggered off by particular circumstances. Consequently, the perception of those circumstances through the prism of cultural heritage in the light of the gospel, as mediated by the Holy Spirit, shapes the resultant theological complexion. This is the point Moltmann seeks to underscore when he writes:

The theologian is a strange creature: he is obliged to talk about God who is unconditionally present to all men in all times and all places, but he is himself only a man who is limited in his capacities and who is conditioned in his views by his own tradition and culture. . . . As I am not an angel but only a man, my perspectives are very limited. They are European and white, protestant and middleclass, out of the twentieth century (I hope) and

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are ultimately determined by my personal experiences and private limitations. They have, therefore, only limited value and can only suggest to other theologians from other lands and Churches and cultures that they look in the same direction from their points of view toward the God who has brought us into this community and who will bring us to a better community.²

This ought to be the confession of all those who are involved in this sacred venture of theologizing.

The implication of this recaptured insight in theologizing is that for theology to be relevant and existentially satisfying, it must be attempting to answer the question which people are asking in the light of the gospel and their own self-understanding in their confrontation with the exigencies of life *now* and in wrestling with the ultimate meaning of such life. For Christian theology to be relevant, therefore, it must be incarnational in the sense that the *Word* must contemporaneously become *Flesh* in the culture, symbols and thought-patterns of a people. This is necessary for the Christ to be apprehended as God's answer to all human experiences as perceived by people in their own particular historical existence. Any failure to take full account of this fact in developing theological thought has serious negative consequences. It may lead to a wholesale adoption of theological answers formulated in a different culture with a different self-understanding which is tantamount to answering questions that nobody is asking. The end-result of such a faulty approach must always be a theological irrelevance, productive of a shallow Christian commitment devoid of spiritual vitality and stability. It produces rootless Christians tossed to and fro by every theological wind that blows because they are not anchored to an existential understanding of God as revealed in Christ.

The task before this writer, therefore, is to reflect on a viable and productive process for developing theological thought that is informed by the recaptured theological insight which has been sketched above. In his attempt to execute the task, the author intends to treat the matter under two headings: (1) a brief description of various scholarly approaches, and (2) points to be considered in developing African Christian theology.

1. A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF VARIOUS SCHOLARLY APPROACHES

This new realization, that theology that is spiritually vibrant and satisfying must take wholesome and serious cognisance of prevailing culture and context, slowly came to its own in the nineteen fifties. It increased in tempo, especially among Roman Catholic theologians, following official recognition from Vatican II. Protestant theologians soon joined their Roman Catholic counterparts in promoting new theological perspectives. As would be expected in theological enterprises, scholars cast about for suitable rubrics under which this new perception of the theological task could be carried out. One erudite pioneer, the Nigerian national theologian and scholar, Professor Bolaji Idowu, was among African scholars (if not the first) to come up with the term *indigenous theology*, as ably argued in his book *Towards an Indigenous Church*, published in 1965. Idowu's trail-blazing example has since been followed by other theologians in the non-North Atlantic churches. Commenting on indigenization, Kwesi Dickson, one such African theologian, contends that the basic assumption of the indigenization model is that 'there is a distinction between the "core of the Gospel" and Christianity, the latter subsuming the former but including culture elements which came with the Gospel through the missionaries.' In other words, around the gospel has been woven cultural

vestments which the missionaries considered to be of a piece with the Gospel message. The argument then is that the Western elements should give way to the elements of African culture, thereby placing the Gospel message in a relevant setting.³ Although there are advantages in this approach, if care is not taken, indigenization can make theologizing a mechanical exercise where one substitutes one cultural element for another. To do so is to miss the whole point of theologizing as a dynamic discovery process of spirit-led human interaction with God as revealed in Christ in existential encounter within any given life situation. Theologizing, so understood, is therefore deeper and more complex than merely replacing Western cultural elements with corresponding African cultural elements.

Other scholars, rejecting indigenization, have suggested the language of *adaptation* for developing theological thinking. This approach, however, presupposes that every North-Atlantic theological school of thought had a philosophical basis such as rationalism, existentialism or empiricism. Assuming this to be the case in Western theologies, the theologian in a new context should develop a specific philosophy or adopt a particular frame of reference as a springboard for theologizing. Latin American theologians have used this approach in their adoption of Marxism as a theological model. While this model lends itself freely to liberation theology, as in Latin America, it may easily lead to an unbalanced emphasis on human political and social circumstances at the expense of divine revelation of human nature. Moreover, adaptation as an approach may result in reductionism which leaves out of divine revelation elements of human experience which are not amenable to the specific philosophical stance adopted as a basis for the theological interpretation.

In addition to those two approaches or models for developing theological thought, other terms, such as *ethnotheology* and *translation*, have been suggested. Ethnotheology has not gained wide acceptance, not because it is not descriptive, but because of the derogatory nuances associated with social scientists' distinction between sociology and cultural anthropology or ethnology. In this connection, Schreiter remarks, sociologists call their science *sociology* when it is done in modern technologically advanced countries but, when done in non-European countries, it is designated as *cultural anthropology* or *ethnology*. Against this background, scholars fear that ethnotheology may suggest a theology inferior to that done in the North Atlantic church.

Towering above all these in acceptability seems to be *contextualisation*. This is like adaptation in some ways but is not tied to a particular philosophical basis. Like indigenization, it takes human culture and the prevailing world view seriously but it is not tied to any culture as if culture were a fossilized stone impervious to change. The contextualisation model is a dynamic method of theologizing. It is open to the influence of culture both in perception of reality and in apprehension and appropriation of divine revelation to meet the perceived existential needs of the individual in his cultural milieu. This is to be realized without the imposition of any philosophical filter. While unanimity on a particular approach is not crucial, it seems to this writer that contextualisation is more comprehensive and more widely accepted by scholars because it is shorn of all derogatory insinuations associated with other models. Moreover, it takes account of the incarnational nature of Christian understanding of divine revelation.

2. POINTS TO BE CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Theologizing as a spiritual reflection on the Bible as the inspired Word of God against

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the backdrop of a specific circumstance is a dynamic process in which the theologian listens intensely and reverently to the Holy Spirit. It is listening done in the light of the deepest human needs as perceived against the world view and self-understanding of the theologian. The theologian proceeds in this exercise from a basic faith-commitment or presupposition. The faith-commitment is that the *living Word* as mediated by the Holy Spirit stands ready behind the written word to grant to a spiritually sensitive and open searcher an insightful understanding of God's nature, his will and purpose in any human situation as perceived by the individual concerned. In other words, to quote Helmut Thielicke, "a theological thought" can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God'.⁴ This kind of understanding of the task of a theologian is reflected in Mary Lathbury's hymn:

Break Thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
As Thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;
Beyond the sacred page, I seek Thee, Lord:
My spirit pants for Thee, O living Word.⁵

Theologizing, so understood, is a sacred venture and it must not be entered into with levity. It calls for the best in any one in terms of sensitivity to the presence of God as he seeks to interpret temporal reality in the light of God's self-disclosure which is never disclosed in black and white. Like a miner of any precious mineral embedded deep down in the rocks, the theologian, armed with a clear knowledge of the temporal situation and intently tuned into the divine wavelength, enters the quarry of God's Word with the understanding that the signals he receives come in and are interpreted through the antennae of his world view and thought patterns. That this is the model for theologizing is exemplified in the Bible itself, as demonstrated in the characteristics that distinguish one Bible writer from another. For instance, Pauline theology and his style of expression is quite different from Peterine theology and its thought-form, yet they both encountered the same God in Christ.

It is clear from the above view of a theologian and the nature of this work that he cannot, as advocated by some, just select certain theological formulations of Christian doctrine as forged in the 'crucible' of Western context, and either translate them into African concepts, or replace the identifiable Western cultural elements with equivalent African cultural elements. In the words of Daniel Von Allmen:

Any authentic theology must start ever anew from the focal point of faith, which is the Confession of the Lord Jesus Christ who died and was raised for us; and it must be built or rebuilt (whether in Africa or in Europe) in a way which is both faithful to the inner thrust of the Christian Revelation and also in harmony with the mentality of the person who formulates it. There is no short cut to be found by simply adapting an existing theology to contemporary or local taste.⁶

The implication is that a *theology* that is simply passed from one cultural context to another, rather than being developed within that context, must always be irrelevant.

It is evident then that the task of developing African Christian theology, in addition to Christian commitment on the part of the theologian, calls for the possession of intellectual, biblical and theological skills and a working knowledge of the principles of effective communication. Acquisition of skills in biblical and theological scholarship will enable him to analyse the historical and cultural circumstances in which the original

message as enshrined in the Bible was revealed by God. Such an analysis, according to Kraft, will include the 'study of such things as relevance and impact aspects of each situation, the personal dynamics of the interaction, and the cultural factors, including the understanding and expectations of both the communicator(s) and the recipient(s) of the communication'.⁷

Assuming that the theologian has those skills, he is faced with the problem of how to communicate whatever revelation comes in that process. This is complicated for the African theologian by the sheer fact that he acquired his intellectual tools for biblical exegesis and theologizing within Western culture with all the implications that this connotes. That means that he has three different cultures to deal with:

- (i) the cultural setting in which the original biblical message was communicated.
- (ii) the Western culture in which he acquired his intellectual tools and the received theological formulations shaped by that culture.
- (iii) the African culture through whose antennae he now must listen to apprehend God's message and to communicate it to his people.

If he is to be effective, he needs, beside his faith-commitment and intellectual tools, at least a basic knowledge of transcultural communication. The Westerner, indeed, needs this skill to communicate the original message within his own culture, but the problem is more complex for the African theologian, given the above analysis coupled with the truth that the current version of Christian theology in Africa is wrapped in Western culture. He is then faced with the subtle temptation to think that all that needs to be said is already contained in the package. This he must resist if he is to succeed in his attempt to develop theological thought.

Assuming that the budding theologian has surmounted these problems, he still has to wrestle with communication skills. Experts remind us that, contrary to the intention of a communicator to ensure that what his audience receives is in a one-to-one correspondence with his message, this ideal is never achieved. This is so, we are told, because meanings are never transmitted, only messages:

Meaning comes from a reservoir in which all of our prior experiences are contained. When we encounter a social stimulus, we dip into our reservoir and, using our own unique thought process, extract the meaning we deem appropriate and attach it to the stimulus.⁸

The bottom line is that the meaning an individual attaches to what I say is *often more* the product of his own extraction from what he 'hears' me to be saying than the meaning I originally intended to convey. This being so, a wise communicator will strive to enter the frame of reference of his audience in order to know the types of symbols or stimuli that are derivable from the experiences which they both have in common. The attainment of this feat does not guarantee a one-to-one correspondence between the message and what is 'heard' by the audience, because no two individuals ever have an identical experience of any reality. This effort does, however, help to narrow the difference between the message as presented and the meaning the hearer extracts from it. Paul definitely followed this principle when he decided to 'be all things to all people in order to win some'. To the Jews, Paul was a Jew, and to the Greeks he communicated as a Greek. He entered into the world of each audience so that he could participate in their 'world' to be able to communicate with them from the vantage point of a 'common world'. Jesus Christ, as the 'Master Teacher', exemplified this principle

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because he taught deep spiritual truths, using the cultural symbols of the Jews in their everyday life which he and they shared in common.

What these examples teach the African Christian theologian, and all those who theologize in a different culture for that matter, is:

People of different cultures, speaking different languages, are not simply attaching different linguistic labels to elements of the same real world but are actually operating in terms of different realities. That is, reality at the perceptual level is culturally and subculturally defined rather than being a function of biology or environment.⁹

In other words, while truth and reality remain the same in an *absolute* sense, the perception of them differs from culture to culture, as well as from individual to individual even within the same culture or subculture. This reminds one of the story of the reports of three blind men who described the one elephant they all felt. While each capitalized on the aspect of the reality experienced, a combination of all the aspects is needed to define the reality. The truth, however, is that while none of them exhausted the reality, each had an existential contact with the one reality. This is a parable of our theological apprehension within the particular context of our needs: the picture each of us paints, if considered in isolation, will not approximate to the whole until we all contribute our quotas of understanding to the tapestry of our theological apprehension of God.

The type of communication that may become an effective tool by means of which a theologian can minimize the difficulty generally encountered is known as *transculturation* in the science of communication. Applied to theology, Kraft describes it as 'the task of the Spirit-led communicator of the message'¹⁰ of the gospel. The aim of transculturation is to represent the meaning of historical events, such as biblical events, as if they were clothed in contemporary events. It is more comprehensive than translation in the sense that, while translation aims to provide a faithful written record of the biblical events, transculturation attempts to take both speaker and hearer behind that record into a re-creation of equivalent events in today's cultural context.¹¹ This is easier if both communicator and audience participate in the same culture but, if not, the communicator must first put himself in the frame of reference of his audience.

Any African Christian theologian, taking appropriate note of what we have said above, is in a position to begin his theologizing, depending on his immediate need. For instance,

- (i) He may want to start with themes that are recurrent in African life and traditional religion as a springboard for presenting Christian theology as it relates to those themes.
- (ii) He may want to write a systematic theology that is informed by African world views.

From whichever angle he begins, he will discover that the overall frame of meaning of the African and his self-understanding, properly understood, will tilt the theological emphasis in the direction of certain themes, such as:

- (a) *Emphasis on the meaning and efficacy of the sacrificial death of Christ and his present intercessory role.*
- (b) *Apprehension of Christ, first and foremost, as the 'Victor and Liberator par*

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excellence', who lives for ever to destroy the demonic forces wherever they are found. This he does to liberate those committed to him from the stranglehold of evil forces as perceived by Africans.

- (c) *Apprehension of Christ as the Cosmic Lord who supplies the total human needs within the context of each individual. In this way, Christ's saving concern will be seen as transcending the narrow ambit of spiritual salvation to include liberation from human oppression and reconciliation not only with God but of each individual to his fellow human being and to nature.*
- (d) *A renewed emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the day-to-day life of a Christian. This has been neglected in the 'received theology' imported from North-Atlantic orthodox churches. The failure to emphasize such a vital theological theme has resulted in the production of 'rudderless' Christians who are left adrift on the sea of life with no understanding of a divine provision of recourse to spiritual guidance. This state of theological ignorance robs the Christian of his birthright to the appropriation of the promise of Christ that the Holy Spirit is forever available to go alongside the Christian in his daily life.*
- (e) *A new appreciation of the place of prayer in Christian life. As a result of over-dependence on human technology, little more than lip-service has been paid to the importance of prayer in the 'received theologies'. This has left the average Christian vulnerable to the attack of demonic forces for lack of a conscious sustained spiritual relationship with God. The contemporary attraction to new churches points to the void which this neglect has created in the spiritual life of most Christians.*

In all these themes, it is quickly discovered that the African world view is very close to the one in which the original biblical revelation was mediated. Against that background, the following essential parameters emerge as sources for the development of Christian theology in Africa:

1. The living Christ
2. The inspired Word as mediated by the Spirit
3. A dynamic understanding of church tradition
4. The culture of the particular people
5. The life situation that calls forth the whole venture.

It is assumed throughout this paper that the theologian is a Christian who is sensitive to the presence of God as mediated by the Holy Spirit. With that faith-commitment he does his work, putting at the disposal of God all the intellectual skills discussed above. A faithful prosecution of this task will result in a Christian theology that bears the marks of African life, culture and world view. Such an achievement will not only be spiritually satisfying to the Africans but will also enrich the whole corpus of Christian theology, since it will add freshness and new insights that have been ignored in other cultures because of the difference between such cultures and world views on the one hand and those of the Africans on the other. Above all, for the African Christian, Christianity will not be regarded as a foreign religion in which Christ is currently considered a foreign Saviour who is not familiar with the perceived metaphysical forces in whose grips the African lives in fear and anxiety. A relevant theology that touches his whole life as he

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perceives it will lead to an existential apprehension of Christ and commitment to him as the incarnation of the one Creator God who created heaven and earth and all that are in them. The sufficiency of Christ may never be experienced by many African Christians until our theological formulations are thoroughly informed by the African cultural world view and perception within the context of the African situation, but when set in that context it is a bigger and more relevant Christ that they will discover.

NOTES

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Schreiter, p.1.
- 2 Moltmann, p.5.
- 3 Dickson, p.116.
4. Thielicke, p.34.
- 5 *Baptist Hymnal* p.178.
- 6 Daniel Von Allmen, *International Review of Mission* 44: 37-55.
- 7 Kraft, p.294.
- 8 Kraft, p.282.
- 9 Kraft, p.288.
- 10 Kraft, p.280.
- 11 Kraft, p.281.

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NOTE

I am pondering the significance of the fact that whilst one of our North American contemporaries celebrates the 200th anniversary of the founding of the BMS, another commemorates the 500th anniversary of the birth of colonialism. In the June issue of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission's *Baptist History and Heritage* the theme is *World Mission: Two Centuries of Baptist Achievement*. Leon McBeth writes on 'The Legacy of the BMS'; other articles reflect on contemporary missiology with two articles analysing the contribution of women to the modern missionary movement. The *American Baptist Quarterly* subtitled its June issue *Contemporary Missions in the Wake of 500 Years of Colonialism*. This provides a fascinating encounter between missiologists, North American missionaries and the national leadership of our Central American churches, the fruits of a consultation held in San José, Costa Rica, after the participants had spent some days visiting in the area. JHYB