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ACCULTURATION OF CHRISTIAN MESSAGE IN AFRICA: THE 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The Western missionary approach to African Christianity was generally done in such a way that African culture and way of life were somewhat denigrated and negated. In this approach, missionary Christianity did not develop a relevant theological and musicological link between African traditional religions and cultures and the Christian Gospel. Hence, Western missionaries failed to develop a relevant Biblical theology of African religions, cultures and society. This then made African theologians and scholars react and responded to these apparent failures and weaknesses of the missionary approach and legacy by developing their own African Biblical Theology. A theology that is indigenous to Africa, is the one said to have been produced using African thought, religion and cultural categories. It is a theology produced within context, which reject the richness of the pre-Christian African heritage. This paper therefore made an attempt at examining the challenges facing the 21st century African Theologians with the view to recommend how best to acculturate the Christian message in an acceptable way for African Christians.

Introduction

Since the late 1950s, African theologians have developed a variety of African Theologies, a theology that is distinctively African. It represents various forms of African criticisms of Western Christianity and missionaries through research writings and documentation. religious and theological works of the African biblical theologians and scholars are what we call African biblical Theology (Turaki, 1999: 15). The aim is to help clarify the place of the bible in the pursuit of African Christian theology, by establishing the legitimacy of African Christian theology and by having an impact on actual theological engagement (Hillman, 1993:69).

In the 1980s, the issue of identity and of religious and cultural continuity and discontinuity were being brought to a close. But a further indication that the

early concentration on achieving a theological interpretation of the pre-Christian religions tradition had been appropriate was the fact that the exploration of new themes took off from categories directly derived from the apprehension of reality and the transcendent as experienced within the world-views of African primal religions. This is most markedly so in relation to Christological discussion, where a category like "Ancestor" became one element in the reflection on the African experience of the actuality of Christ. The writings of Charles Nyamtti, Anselme Sanon, John Pobee, Benezet Bujo, Francois Kabasele, while they have a distinctively different ring with them, are clearly fully meaningful only as they are related to the achievements of their predecessors (Bediako, 2000:7). The missionary Christian impact was criticised as regards its paternalistic nature and Western characteristics.

The missionary classical indigenisation philosophy of the three selves (self-propagation, self-support and self-governance) has also been criticised in its outcome as paternalistic, in that the missionary products in Africa, in reality, stand in a parent-child relationship to Western mission (Bediako, 1995:15). Furthermore the missionaries were not well-trained and well groomed in the art of Theological education, church administration and the Christian faith and life of Africans and their culture and religions. They were also ill-prepared and ill-equipped to handle rapid socio-cultural and political changes in Africa (Bediako, 1995:16).

The late 1960s and 70s were therefore devoted to addressing the African theological problems and issues. The primary focus in this search is the development of an indigenous theology. It was an attempt at understanding the essence of Christianity and to interpret that understanding through the thought categories of Africa. The need for Africans to develop and have their own indigenous theology was stressed. African students of comparative religions such as Bolaji Idowu and John S. Mbiti and many others contributed immensely in elevating African traditional religions, cultures and philosophy to be comparable to Christianity and Western theology and philosophy. This approach gave strength to the renewed interest in the study of African traditional religions, philosophy and culture. The research findings and conclusions in comparative religions, cultural anthropology and philosophy were usually used as the prerequisites to the development of an African Theology.

The African pre-Christian heritage was deemed as necessary in doing African Theology (Bediako, 1995: 15). To do this successfully, moving the bible text to

a contextual theology in Africa became problematic. This was as a result of a number of reasons to which this research would highlight with a view to proffering solution.

The Search for Acculturation of Biblical Theology in Africa

The search for an African theology was in a sense an attempt at developing a theology that was indigenous to Africa, which was a reflection of the African way of understanding and interpreting the essence of Christianity. The study of various theological subjects, such as African theology of marriage, worship, community, God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ and the church, were strongly advocated. This approach in consequence, established African philosophy, culture and worldview as the prolegomena to understanding and interpreting Christianity and the Holy Scriptures. It seems to suggest that Christianity and the Holy Scriptures cannot be interpreted accurately without this "African prolegomena" the overriding emphasis of the approach seems to give credence to the assumption that the only "good" Christianity or Theology for Africa is the one that has been developed or formulated through the African culture and worldview. The goal in this search, is to make "Christianity" and "Theology" more African and less Western. The result of the Theological exercise has not always produced a sound Biblical and Christian theology, but was one heavily dominated by the "cultural agenda".

A theology that is indigenous to Africa, is the one said to have been produced using African thought, religion and cultural categories. It is a theology produced within context, which reflect the richness of the pre-Christian African heritage. From our study of African Theology, the theological works seems to be motivated and guided more by the "cultural agenda" and the political ideology of the nationalist era. The religious and cultural sensitivities, as manifested in the works of some African Scholars and Theologians, did not allow for any serious evaluation and analysis of such works so as to ascertain their Biblical accuracy and Christian theological soundness (Turaki, 1999:15).

The need to indigenise Christianity became a tallying cry of some African theologians and scholars. Their primary objectives were to strip and rid Christianity in Africa of all its Western striplings and coverings and replace that with what is African. The goal of indigenising Christianity, as it was hoped, was to make it look more African and to rid it of all its foreign elements.

These advocate had a strong belief that Christianity in Africa was brought under the cover of Western culture and for this reason, African culture should be made

to replace Western culture. They also believed that Africans would understand Christianity much better if it were fully indigenised. The overriding interest of the cultural agenda tended to make the African theological exercise look more like that of a cultural replacement - African culture replacing Western culture which has dominated Christianity on African soil (Turaki, 1999: 15). African advocates believed that the mode, form and content of Christianity must be cast in the new African constructs so as to remove its foreignness and strangeness and grant it its African dignity. This task was further stressed in the area of theological language and all its thought categories which must be stripped of all Western thought and also be replaced by African thought.

This movement believes strongly that Africans do not have to become Western in outlook in order to embrace Christianity. They do not have to abandon their culture to become Christians. All that is necessary is for Africans to embrace in faith Jesus the Messiah as their Lord and Saviour. In other words, only the "seed" of Christianity has to be planted in African soil and when it germinates, it will grow into African Christianity. Emphasis on cultural and political ideology made many Africans reject Christianity. The implication of the Christian faith within the African context necessitates the development of a relevant theology that can address African culture, religion and contextual questions. For the past three decades, the African cultural agenda and the political ideology have dominated African Theology. The focus of this era was more on cultural hermeneutics than Biblical hermeneutics (Turaki, 1999:15).

Closely related to the indigenisation principle, is the Africanisation principle the need is not only to strip Christianity of its entire Western strappings and coverings and then indigenise it but also the need to control the institutional Christianity and determine its destiny in Africa. Africans must be seen to be in charge and control of the church and the mission policies that affect their destiny. The focus here is mainly on personnel, administration and church structures. The cry was that more Africans needed to be trained so that they could take over the work from the missionaries both the mission and the church should be Africanised and take over by Africans. Indigenisation and Africanisation were movement motivated by the nationalist's movement of the late 1940s through to the early 1960s. The influence of these nationalist doctrines and the aspirations of Africans in the political realm also found its way into the church and mission circles in Africa. On account of this Africans in the church and the mission field sought to have some measure of autonomy from the Western control of Christianity (Hillman, 1993:74). Indigenisation and

Africanisation did not in any way address the central and primary African Theological problem rather they focused more upon cultural definitions of Christianity and African participation in the Christianisation process. Africans could be seen to be in charge of the church and the nation, but not necessarily be in a position of doing and producing an indigenous African Theology. Deeper theological issues were more than just indigenisation and Africanisation which in large measure, were motivated by the political and cultural ideology of the pioneering era. There were issues and questions yet to be resolved by indigenisation and Africanisation. African needs an indigenous theology that is contextual, relevant and biblical.

The Challenges of Acculturation

Contextualisation means many things to many people. However, its overriding goal is that of making theology relevant and meaningful in its application within content. Contextualisation demands profound understanding of translating the gospel in its relationship to the contemporary historical situation. It is a dialogue between text of the scripture and the context in which the text was given or is to be applied. The task of contextualisation is of utmost importance as different culture and changing ideologies constantly required that the church express its faith in different ways. Every theology reflects the needs and the socio-cultural context of the people at a particular point in history. Thus, contextualisation aims at interpreting the Christian truth and applying it to the real life issues arising from the socio-cultural context within which the theologian lives (Orebiyi and Dairo, 2000:2).

The contextuality of the church's faith is reflected in the diverse ways in which the gospel story is told and lived out in various contexts. The Medieval development of Christian theology was heavily influenced by Greek Philosophical ideas. The theologians of the middle ages made use of thought forms inherited from Platonic and Aristotelian Philosophies and these ideas were passed down from generation to generation. If theology is to become truly contemporary then, these philosophical presuppositions that underlie the ancient creedal statements and formulations and the later medieval synthesis must be identified and set aside.

Contextualization takes seriously the relevant communication of the unchanging Gospel message into the language and cultural thought forms of those to whom it is communicated. It involves proper interpretation of the scriptures. It takes into consideration the cultural context of the biblical

message, the theologian or communicator's self understanding and the receiving community's response to the message. It is a process which involves inter-cultural communication of the gospel message. Contextualization is therefore all about contextual interpretation or hermeneutics.

The scripture is not a set of truths and principles and rules which, when once known, can be transmitted from man to man and from that time onto all generations. The theologian speaks primarily for his own age, facing the problem of truth and falsehood in relation to the issues with which his age is confronted. Thus all his statements, no matter how great the truth that reside in them, have a time-bound quality. This means that hermeneutics, like all theology, has its life not in a vacuum but in a specific historical situation in which human beings are confronted with the dilemmas of their existence and ask what the Christian faith has to say to them in the understanding and solution to those dilemmas.

The scripture has a context i.e. the inter-related conditions in which it exists. Theology is thus contextually influenced. A theologian has to look back into the history of the development of this confessional tradition to see the changes that has taken place in theological understanding and then see how to reconcile the basic Christian message with the new understanding of human existence, being sensitive to current activity of God in history. Contextualisation is therefore a process which seeks to communicate the biblical message to the modern man in his own context, using illustrations, examples, symbols and languages that will make the message relevant to the modern man in every race, tribe and nation (Orebiyi and Dairo, 2000:2).

Contextualisation is concerned mainly with the theological relevance. Whatever might have been indigenised or Africanised or whatever indigenous theology might have been developed, and produced the question of its relevance to the African context is paramount. Contextualisation as a tool of doing theology in African focused principally on making the essence of Christianity relevant and understood within context (African or Christianity) a possible mixture of the gospel, Holy Scriptures and the cultural Christianity. Some theologians seem to lay emphasis on the African context, world view, culture, religion, tradition, social values and institution while some lay emphasis on the text (Lamin, 1995:7). The strategy of moving from Text to the Context is to preserve the essence of Christianity, which is found in the Holy Scriptures. The text should be transmitted accurately and be made relevant to the recipients' context.

If the text is obscured and difficult to understand, then it has to be made relevant. If it is the context that poses a problem, then, it has to be studied and understood so as to determine what mode and form of the contents of the text should be transmitted and also how this transmission should be undertaken. Thus, the bridging of the gap between the text and the context relies very much upon good communication skills. The communication skills needed are the principles of interpretation or hermeneutics of the text and also the social tools of analysis of the context or cultural hermeneutics. Lamin emphasises the critical cultural factors in translation which affect both the receiver and missionaries and meaning which emerges from the process of translation, produced by both "subjective" and "objective" factors (Lamin, 1995:7). Bediako stresses the significance of the vernacular, the need of reading or hearing the bible in one's mother tongue (Bediako, 1995:16).

It is therefore important to note that contextualisation is the theological method which is complex. To deal with this problem, African scholars set out from the early 1970s to date to proffering solution to whatever hinders understanding, whether from Western or African cultural baggage, or from the Biblical text, that should be dealt with through the principles of Biblical and cultural hermeneutics. The search has not been able to give us a final word in this area, but instead, has heightened the quest for better theological methods. Being mindful of this problem, many theologians have come up with a variety of forms of contextualisation. There are those who emphasis that a better way of understanding the historical transmission of Christianity into African or elsewhere must take the task of translation seriously the translation of the gospel message or scriptures into the vernacular (Lamin, 1995:7).

There are others who emphasis "inculturation" that is, those who desire to reduce both the messengers and the messages into communicable and understandable categories of the recipient culture and context (Pobee, 1979:33). This approach seeks to inculturate the gospel carriers and also to interpret the scriptures and Christianity into the language and cultural categories of the people for clear understanding and interpretation. Pobee advocates "skenosis", which means "the tabernacle of the word in culture" (John 1: 14 "the word became flesh and lived among us") a form of incarnational theology our concern however lies in the fact that the contextualisation must make the bible and Christian theology the primary tool of contextualisation. This must contrast with those who make culture or religion the primary tool of contextualisation (Pobee, 1979:33).

It should be noted that Christianity from its origin identified itself with the need to translate out of Aramaic and Hebrew and from that position came to exert a dual force in its historical development. One need to relate this Judaic root so as promote significant aspects of those roots and then destigmatise genuine culture and adopt that culture as a natural extension of African Biblical Theology. Sanneh emphasises the use of the translation principle, stating that missionary adoption of the vernacular was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message. This is radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western culture imperialism (Lamin, 1995:7).

To Walls, the vernacular established an important factor in the translation principle of Christian history (Walls, 1996: 111). Both Sanneh and Walls used the translation principle in establishing the significance of the Christian missionary enterprise and in providing a very powerful counter to secular critiques of world Christianity. The translation principle is a very powerful tool in Christian evangelization and planting of Christianity in various cultural settings around the world. Bediako calls this principle a theological method in doing theology in Africa (Bediako, 1995: 16)... Translation principle is a very powerful tool in transmitting the gospel as well as a tool for doing theology.

Theological methodology which has dominated this field in Africa has been the comparative study of religions with a variegated emphasis on the anthropological, phenomenological, cultural and sociological approaches. The historical and the descriptive are used also while the theological and the biblical method have been given very little attention. Majority of theologians and scholars of African theology use research tool such as the bible and Christianity only as secondary to their primary tools of methodology. In most cases the bible and Christian theology were used very sparingly. The consequence of having weak biblical teachings and Christian theology in the study of traditional religion is to give primacy to the traditional religious beliefs and worldviews as a means of elucidating, guiding and influencing theological understanding, interpretation and application (Turaki, 1999:18). Most major and influential works in Africa theology are of this category. They were not written from this perspective of a sound biblical theology and Christian worldview, but rather from the perspectives of the African traditional religion and cultural worldviews. In consequence, the theology of traditional religions, which had been formulated, had in turn been used to engage Christianity and the bible. The end product may be called "cultural Christianity" or "African Christianity".

To Gwamna (2008:29-30), we must be very careful not to allow 'grassroot theology' to hijack bible-based theology. To do an acceptable African Biblical Theology, the following caution must be taken.

That theology of the people does not necessarily guarantee sound biblical theology as it is moved more by the crowd and, should not dictate biblical theology that has no biblical basis.

That culture of a particular context should not be superimposed in an attempt to do theology in Africa. It should be defined within the universal biblical Christianity.

That the bible in its original settings remains the main source of any biblical interpretation anywhere though application within peculiar contexts could differ. In other words, biblical theology should precede African theology.

That major focus should be guided by the need to make the bible more meaningful, relevant and applicable to Christians who engage in the theological hermeneutical process.

That kerugma, namely, the core of the biblical message centered on the early apostolic proclamation and message, remain the central focus of any Christian hermeneutics.

That Biblical hermeneutics should develop using language that is known and understood by the receptors, in a clear and unambiguous manner.

The task of African Biblical Theologians is enormous. But they must engage the bible from the position of authority, skill and expertise. African scholars must engage in serious biblical language study and principles of doing biblical theology as well as their Western counterparts in order to win the respect and

contribute to theological discourse at a universal level. If African theologians are able to interpret scriptures that will make sense to the African, the bible will remain a major source of life in Africa and the African church will emerge to fulfil its leadership role in a prophetic manner.

Conclusion

The important outcome of all the various theological approaches mentioned so far is that they all make reference to the need of developing a coherent Christian understanding and interpretation of Christianity and the Holy Scriptures in Africa. Reformed Philosophers have called for the development of a comprehensive Christian worldview for Africa (Turaki, 1999: 18).

If the gospel messages are going to touch people profoundly, the imagery and symbolism used for communication and celebration "must be deeply rooted in the corporate experience of the faithful." They must resonate with the real human and religion experience of the people. But this can hardly happen when the symbol system is borrowed from the historically and culturally conditioned experience of some other people, ancient or modern. However, "if they do resonate," Dulles sees this as "proof that there is some isomorphism between what the image depicts and the spiritual reality with which the faithful are in existential contact" (Dulles, 1978:24).

Christian faith should be biblically grounded and rooted because it is dynamic and not just a depository of propositional truths. The contingencies of human life do challenge the Christian faith, which can be deepened or weakened. Christian biblical worldview is dynamic and subject to the contingencies of human life. The holy scriptures are the constant sources from which a Christian worldview can be developed and formulated and a Christian faith can be formed, strengthened, renewed, motivated, and challenged. Christian faith and world view are to be rooted and grounded in the Holy Scriptures, although this process does come under cultural influence in most cases.

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