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Contextualization Revisited

by
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George Peters defines contextualization in theological discussion as discovering “the legitimate implications of the Gospel in a given situation.”¹ This implies a proper understanding of the message of the Gospel and proper understanding of the cultural context. Therefore proper contextualization must take the biblical text and the situation seriously. As the Willowbank Report puts it:

Today’s readers cannot come to the text in a personal vacuum, and should not try to; instead, they should come with an awareness of concerns stemming from their cultural background, personal situation and responding to others. These concerns will influence the questions which are put to the scripture... As we address scripture, scripture addresses us. We find that our culturally conditioned presuppositions are

being challenged and our questions corrected.²

From this perspective, theology is the fruit of a dialogue between the Gospel and the situation. Theology is thus seen as situational. Since there are varied contexts we are bound to have several theologies. In that sense theology or the enterprise of theologizing, which is the expression of faith in context is dynamic — always responding to the challenges of culture and social condition.

We do not intend to go into the debate on contextualization of the Gospel message in Africa or African theologies but we attempt to accentuate a rather neglected aspect of contextualization of the Gospel in Africa, the role played by European missionaries. Our methodology is therefore historical rather than theological.

Before getting into the subject of this paper it would be useful to give a summary of the different theologies that

have emerged in Africa. Justine S. Ukpong has delineated three theological currents that have emerged from the African scene.³

The first is inculturation theology, generally called African Theology, which has arisen from the cultural situation in Africa. However this theology goes further than adapting itself to African culture, it is philosophical, "it involves a conscious engagement of European christian thinking and African religious thought in serious dialogue for the purpose of integrating christianity into the life and culture of the African people."⁴ Some of its apostles are, among protestants, J.S. Mbiti, E.B. Idowu, J.S. Pobe, S.G. Kibicho, amongst Romans Catholics, Vincent Mulago, Charles Nyamity, Bishop Ishishiku Tshibangu, Ngindu Mushete, Aylward Shorter, etc.

The second milestone is South African black theology. A child of African-American black theology, which came to Africa primarily through the writing of James Cone and the role played by Basil Moore a leader of a multi-racial christian movement in South Africa, the University Christian Movement (UCM). Black theology rejects the aspirations of African Theology because according to Mana Buthelezi one of its leading protagonists, African Theology "merely looks at the past and seeks to justify the

present situation of black people."⁵ However, Black Theology seeks to re-interpret the Christian teaching to deal with the dehumanization of the black people in South Africa. Thus Black Theology is a combination of African Negritudism with African American militancy. It is a "reaction to the lethargy of traditional (Christian) theology."⁶ Other proponents of Black Theology are Gabriel Setiloane, Steve Biko, and Adam Small.

The third current is Liberation Theology borrowed from the Latin American experience. It addresses itself to the poverty of the African people caused by alien economic structures imposed on Africa to perpetuate Africa's servitude to foreign economic powers. Its exponents are John M. Mbinga, C. Lyno, Chukwudum B. Okolo, and Zablun Nthamburi.

Although these theologies differ according to their settings they have a common goal: freedom and life. As Ukpong puts it, "Negatively put these issues expresses reaction to negations of freedom and of life's meaningfulness at different levels of African's existence. Positively, they articulate certain phases in the process of Africa's search for freedom and for meaning in life."⁷

For the purpose of this essay we have limited ourselves to African Theology or inculturation theology. It is in this area that African theologians in

West, East and Central Africa have accused European Missionaries of cultural imperialism. Brain Stanley aptly puts the position thus:

Historians, anthropologists and theologians unite in their judgement that missionaries have been guilty of foisting their own cultural values on their converts. They have upset the stability of indigenous social systems, and saddled the younger churches on the Third World with a thoroughly "foreign" christianity.⁸

A.J. Temu, a Kenyan theologian, is an example. He has written "almost all the protestant missionaries in Kenya viewed all native customs and traditions with abhorance."⁹ Hans Küng, supporting this position, has asserted:

Following the example of Paul, the church became Greek with the Greek World and Barbarian with the European Barbarian World. However, it has not become Arabic with the Arabs, Black with the blacks, Indians with the Indians, or Chinese with the Chinese. Viewed as a whole, the church of Jesus Christ has remained a European American affair.¹⁰

Therefore the task of these Third World Theologians is to unwrap the gospel from its alien cultural packaging and

develop expressions of the christian faith which are genuinely indigenous to their particular cultural contexts.

These charges are not entirely wrong, however the contributions of Western Missionaries to the "Africanization" of christianity, without undue sentiments, were far more numerous than are generally acknowledged.

Perhaps the first to come to mind was the contribution of Henry Venn, C.M.S. Honorary Secretary from 1841-1872. He enunciated the native church policy hinged on his doctrine of the "self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating" church. He issued three memoranda in 1851, 1861 and 1866 in which he postulated a native pastorate scheme. In the scheme Venn made a distinction between the office of a missionary who preaches to the heathen and instructs inquirers of recent converts and the office of a pastor, who minister in holy things to a congregation of native christians. While the missionary, maintained by a foreign missionary society, should take nothing of the Gentiles, the pastor must be supported financially by his congregation for "the ox that treadeth out the corn should eat of the same." The converts a missionary made should be organised as soon as possible in little bands each under a headman, and should start at once to make contributions to a native church fund

separate from the funds of the foreign missionary society. Soon the bands should come together and form a congregation under a native teacher or catechist, whom they should endeavour to maintain. Soon the catechist or any other suitable native should be ordained Pastor and the missionary should then move onto fresh ground.¹¹

In Venn's thinking it was the African Pastor who would understand African problems, culture and aspirations better and would put these into consideration in transmitting the Gospel. Although Venn was not directly involved in the process of contextualization itself he saw the need as early as the 1850s to make the Gospel relevant to the situation converts into christianity lived.

Even in the post-Venn era missionaries that came in the late 1880s and early 1890s, mostly evangelicals, attempted to plant a "pure, simple christianity without the trappings of Western civilization. Their idea of upholding indigeneous dress and building and teaching in the vernacular languages in an unsophisticated society had much to commend them."¹²

David Westerlund has demonstrated how much indebted African theologians are to Western missionaries who studied African Traditional Religion as *sui generis*.¹³ The Anglophone African scholars were influenced by the works of a British Protestant Missionary,

Geoffrey Parinder. Francophone African scholars owe their inspiration to Father Placid Tempels who like Parinder was both a missionary and a scholar of African Religion.¹⁴

Steven Kaplan has provided a detailed account of the missionary contribution to inculturation Theology.¹⁵ He drew his illustration from East, Central and South Africa. The central thesis of Kaplan's article is that contextualization, that is, inculturation theology, did not start with African Scholars. African Scholars began where Western Missionaries had left off.

He provided a typology of the methods missionaries adopted in incarnating the Gospel in Africa. The typology ranges from the simple to the complex.

1. *Toleration method*. This occurred where "missionaries agreed to accept the continued existence of certain African social customs," while at the same time maintaining that these customs were "essentially incompatible with a true christian life."¹⁶

This they did with the hope that such customs would die gradually. The most notorious of these customs was polygamy. CMS missionaries in Kenya in 1907 "expressed the view that baptism should not be denied to a man having more than one wife though any church member subsequently taking a

second or additional wife would be subject to church discipline.”¹⁷ This was also the position of Johannes Bachmann and Bishop Colenso of Natal.

2. *Translation Method.* This was an attempt by European Missionaries to express christian ideas and concepts using African idioms.¹⁸ This missionary input is brought out even more forcefully by Lamin Sanneh when he says:

Missionary adoption of the vernacular, therefore was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism.¹⁹

Sanneh concluded “as long as we accept the need to translate, so long shall we continue to face the challenge to relativize worldly success and detigmatize taboo cultures.”²⁰

Missionaries did not find translation work easy, however. A missionary working in Luba-Katanga area could not find an adequate word for the Holy Spirit. He finally used Nsenka which is the title of an official at the local court who advocates and interceeds on behalf of the people before the king.²¹ Other examples abound.²²

3. *Assimilation Method.* This happened when “elements from a non-christian setting have been introduced into essentially christian rituals.”²³ The Dutch Reformed Church in Shonaland (generally averse to indigenous religious expression) allowed an indigenous form of religious expression “sitting or kneeling with hands together, as a signal of respect during prayer.”²⁴ This practice corresponded with the way the Shona ordinary citizen expresses respect in the presence of a dignity.

4. *Christianization Method.* This was when missionaries sought “to create christian versions of Traditional African rites and practices.”²⁵ An example of such African rites is the rites of initiation. This practice could not be assimilated since there was no christian parallel. Thus missionaries cleansed the inherently non-christian character of such rites and shaped them to the use of the church. The Masasi experiment under Bishop Vincent Lucas of the UMCA is an example. The other is the C.M.S. “Christian and Clean” Jando experiment among the Wagogo.²⁶

5. *Acculturation Method.* This was done when the Western Missionaries attempted to preserve features of traditional cultures which they felt were valuable and compatible with the development of christian spirituality. This is a more advance stage than

toleration. It essentially challenges accepted notion of the civilizing mission of missions. Typical of this idea is the statement, "There are times when one almost resents the coming of motor cars and steamers and aeroplanes... The old days, the old tribal life seems so very much more attractive, one deplores the rapid breaking up and shattering of all that was."²⁷ The christianizer works within the traditional institution so to preserve and restore traditional tribal life. The German missionary and anthropologist, Bruno Gutmann was its strongest advocate.²⁸

6. *Incorporation Method.* This entails the introduction of African concepts into the body of "normative" christianity.²⁹ This is philosophical in character. It involves a re-interpretation of christianity to accommodate African way of thinking. This was begun by Placid Tempels. He described his theological/philosophical development as passing through three stages. The first stage was the "priest phase" which introduced him to African (Bantu) conceptual scheme (Bantu ontology), discussed in his book published in 1945, *Bantu Philosophy*. In this book Tempels centered his discussion on the Bantu concept of "vital force" in his attempt to sell to his Western contemporaries Bantu ontology. The third stage was the 'encounter phase.' He describes this stage thus:

It has been repeatedly said that evangelization work should be adapted. Adapted to what? We can build churches in native architecture, introduce African melodies into the liturgy, use styles of vestments borrowed from Manderins or Bedouins, but real adaptation is adaptation of our spirit to the spirit of these people. Christianity — especially christianity in its highest and most spiritual form — is the only possible consummation of the Bantu ideal. But it is essential to set out this perennial doctrine in terms of Bantu thought and to present the christian life that we offer them as a vital strengthening and a vital uplifting.³⁰

The fruit of this "encounter" is the emergence of the Jamaa movement (Jamaa means family-hood). This is "a new vision on the whole of christianity, a new discovery of christ, or perhaps, a first discovery of christianity, of God's good tidings to mankind."³¹ Jamaa sees Jesus and Mary as more than son and mother but in a mystical sense, "they were linked as father and daughter and husband and wife."³² The application of Jamaa is beyond the African context, it is universal, Tempels contends.

We can see a similarity between Tempels' "encounter" with the position of Gabriel M. Setiloane, who sounded equally extremist:

Some German theologians were scandalized when I suggested that I would look for the Messiah - Christos idea in African thinking somewhere in the area of the African Bongaka (witch doctor) and in the possession of individual persons by divinity. I still believe that an authentic African christology lies in that direction, and the future of African theology lies in digging it out and presenting it to the world.³³

All these levels of contextualization only brush the surface of the issue. Some of them are rather elitistic. When the Gospel got to the African context and the Africans were recruited to serve as missionary agents, a process of translability of the Gospel had begun. Secondly what is often forgotten is that as the Gospel was beginning to be assimilated by the Africans, the African gods did not become dormant. As such there was a spiritual battle. This spiritual dimension has eluded many of these inculturalists.

The problem with contextualization is not whether it is needed or not. Contextualization is inevitable. The

problem is the content of contextual theology. Since African societies are varied any attempt to lump them together and to create a theology for all societies in African would be futile. This is why micro study is imperative. There is a need to formulate and articulate a biblical based tribal or ethnic theology which could be made available as text books for Africa's universities and seminaries. Otherwise the much talked about Africanization of theology in academic circle would continue to be elitist.

Since theology or the enterprise of theologizing is essentially a practical task affecting all aspects of life, the content of theology must reelected a community's situation and interpretation of theological concepts, for example salvation must both be interpreted in its spiritual and practical day to day activities, the same for faith, spirituality, here we are fortunate because Africans have a deeper sense of spirituality than is found in mission christianity. African spirituality is both existential³⁴ and wholistic.³⁵ In Nigeria, for example, there should be a theology that would meet the challenges that have been posed by the incessant religious upheaval. It appears the ordinary christians seem to be asking what should we do?

Realistic achievements have, however, been made in the development

of African Christian liturgical theology. Parrat has enumerated these achievements:

On one level the use of traditional chants and musical instruments is now well established in many churches, as to some extent is the use of African style of dress for the clergy. On a different level, experiments are going on to incorporate aspects of traditional cultic ritual postures for prayer, dancing, aspects of tribal rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage, death) — into Christian worship.³⁶

He warned, however, that “care will need to be taken not simply to attempt to resuscitate traditional practices which have largely been abandoned, nor to offend the susceptibilities of the more conservative congregations in such experiments for liturgical renewal.”

Our purpose in this paper has been to argue that contextualization of the Gospel in Africa (essentially inculturation) began with Western missionaries and African theologians engaged in this enterprise should give them the credit rather than outright condemnations, and to move from polemics to practical realities.

Theology whether African, Black or Liberation must be faithful to the christian faith whose centrality is in the

salvific act of Jesus Christ. It must also be faithful to the scripture.

NOTES

- ¹ Quoted in Christopher U. Manus, "Contextualization of Theology in Nigeria" in *Nigeria Journal of Theology*, Vol. 1 No. 1, 1983, p.25.
- ² Quoted in Tite Tienou, "The Theological task confronting Evangelical Christianity in Africa Today," the 1978 Byang H. Kato memorial lectures delivered at E.C.W.A. Theological Seminary, Igbaja, Kware State, April 17-20, 1978, p.13.
- ³ See "Current Theology: The Emergence of African Theologies" in *Theological Studies* 1984 Vol.3 No.45.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, p.501.
- ⁵ Ngindu Mushete, "The History of Theology in Africa: From Polemics to Critical Irenics" in koffi Appiahkubi and Sergio Torres (eds.), *African Theology en route* N.Y. Orbis books 1971, p.31.
- ⁶ Ukpong, p.522.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p.531.
- ⁸ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag*, Leicester: Appollos, 1990, p.157.
- ⁹ J.A. Temu, *British Protestant Missions*, London: Longmans, 1971, p.155.
- ¹⁰ Mushete, *op.cit.* p.26.
- ¹¹ J.F.A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891*, London: Longmans, 1965. pp.175-176.
- ¹² E.P.T. Crampton, *Christianity in Northern Nigeria*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976, p.28.
- ¹³ David Westerlund, *African Religion in African Scholarship*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1985.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.18.
- ¹⁵ Steven Caplan, "The Africanization of Missionary Christianity," *History and Typology in J.R.A.* Vol. XVII No. 3, 1986.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.168.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.170.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*
- ¹⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989, p.3.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, p.8.
- ²¹ Caplan, p.171.
- ²² For example in Tanzania God was described as a 'Chief,' 'diviner,' 'shepherd.' Mabel Shaw of L.M.S. also used the image of God as 'chief' and translated the christian community as a 'tribe' to teach the Berriba. (See Caplan, pp.171-172).
- ²³ *Ibid*, p.173.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, p.174.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p.175.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, p.178.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p.179.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, p.181.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p.182.
- ³¹ *Ibid*.

^{32.} *Ibid.*

^{33.} "Where are we in African Theology" in Koffi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (eds.), p.64. Also Ngindu Mushete, 'The History of Theology in Africa' in the same book, pp.23-33.

^{34.} Laurent Magesa, "Authentic African Spirituality" in Aylword Shorter (ed.), *African Christian Spirituality*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978, p.74.

^{35.} E. IKenga-Metuh, "The Revival of African Spirituality" in *Encounter of Religions in African Cultures*, W.C.C., 1989, p.39.

^{36.} John Parat (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, London: S.P.C.K., 1987, pp.144-145.