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THE LEGACY OF BYANG KATO*

Keith Ferdinando

More than 30 years since his premature death cut short an outstandingly promising ministry, Byang Kato's contribution to the growth of African evangelical Christianity remains unique. His book, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, translated into French as *Pièges Théologiques en Afrique*, still provokes comment and controversy, as it has done since its publication in 1975. In recent years the *African Journal of Evangelical Theology* has published accounts of his life and work by Yusufu Turaki (2001) and Christien Bremen (1996). Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology named its chapel after him, and the Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui its library, appropriate recognition of his role in the foundation of both institutions. The suggestion that he was 'the founding father of modern African evangelical theology'¹ is no exaggeration, readily justified by an appraisal of recent African church history.

Byang Henry Kato was born in June 1936 into the Hahm or Jaba people in the Nigerian town of Kwoi in Kaduna state. His parents were adherents of Jaba traditional religion, but he was converted to Christ at the age of twelve in a primary school of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). He subsequently went to Igbaja Bible College, gained British secondary school certificates by correspondence, and in 1966 was awarded a London University Bachelor of Divinity degree after three years study at London Bible College. He returned to Igbaja as professor from 1966-1967 and, aged 31, became General Secretary of the Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA) in 1967. He undertook postgraduate studies at Dallas Theological Seminary in the early 1970s, obtaining their Master of Sacred Theology and Doctor of Theology degrees. In

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1973 he was appointed General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM, now more simply the Association of Evangelicals of Africa—AEA), the second incumbent of that position and the first African to hold it. He drowned just two years later, aged 39, in a tragic and unexplained swimming accident while on vacation at the Kenyan coast.

Theology

Kato was a pioneer of modern African evangelical scholarship, the first evangelical African Christian to gain a doctoral degree in theology. His literary remains are modest, comprising a number of articles, one or two pamphlets, and *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, which is the published version of his doctoral thesis. Whatever one's view of it, *Theological Pitfalls* was a pioneering work of African evangelical theology, which should 'be viewed within [the] wider context of Kato's vision for a positive evangelical theological initiative in Africa.'² Quite simply he showed that African theological scholarship need not be the unique preserve of theological liberals, as had seemed to be the case.

In this connection Kato's swift acceptance of the notion of *contextualisation* was particularly significant. The provenance of the word itself, first employed by Shoki Coe in the document, 'Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund' in 1972, made it suspect to many evangelicals.³ Some prominent American missiologists reacted negatively to it because of the way in which the concept was understood in ecumenical circles. Kato, however, recognised its importance for the well-being of the African church, and believed that it did not imply compromising any of the theological principles which he considered fundamental. His approach ensured that mainstream African evangelicalism should not become entrenched in an obscurantist and contextually irrelevant 'fundamentalism'. *Theological Pitfalls* itself as well as many of his articles addressed some of the issues of the Africa of the 1970s, and are themselves, therefore, early moves towards a contextual approach.

It is of course true that his understanding of contextualisation reflected his time. His approach may not have had the theoretical basis and subtlety of those who followed, and *Theological Pitfalls* is, as Bowers points out, 'a "maiden effort" .. his first major publication .. [an] initial contribution' rather than the 'magnum opus'⁴ which might have followed but for his early death. Nevertheless, his book and articles remain exemplary in at least two respects. First, his intention was truly to contextualise the gospel *for Africans*: he addressed African issues and most of what he wrote was published in Africa. In contrast, Parratt has noted 'the tendency of some African scholars to write and publish with a Western, rather than an African, audience in mind ... to publish

their work exclusively in the West ... and with an eye to the plaudits of Western academics rather than to the usefulness of their work to the African church.⁵ Second, and related to this, Kato's theological activity aimed at a much broader African readership than just the theological *cognoscenti*. He avoided the trap which besets much Western theology, that of academic theologians producing inaccessible works of scholarship for one another. So he wrote, 'I am fully in favour of the ever-abiding gospel being expressed within the context of Africa, for Africans to understand.'⁶ His concern was for the church and the fulfilment of its calling in the world, rather than the approbation of the academy. Despite his many criticisms of Kato's work, Bediako pays gracious tribute to the essentially practical and pastoral concerns that motivated it, describing him as 'practical, wise and pastorally concerned', and speaking of his 'essentially practical mind'. He is, says Bediako, 'most helpful on issues related to the impact of Christian commitment and discipleship on what is "considered good and beneficial in marriage in African society".'⁷

Polemic

Nevertheless, to a considerable extent Kato's significance lies in the polemical nature of much of his writing. *Theological Pitfalls* is itself a polemic, responding to what he saw as a rising tide of universalism and syncretism within African theology and church. This he identified particularly in the works of John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu, and in the ecumenical movement as embodied in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). His principal concern was to insist on the radical discontinuity between the gospel and African traditional religions – or indeed any non-Christian religion – in response to approaches which suggested an essential continuity between them. Briefly, he responded to the inclusivist tendency of some contemporary African theologians with exclusivist arguments adapted to the African context.

Theological Pitfalls is not without weaknesses. Bowers refers to its 'angularity' and 'limitations': 'the analysis is not always accurate, the polemic not always just, the demonstration not always persuasive, the organization not always clear.'⁸ Such criticisms do not of themselves negate the essential validity of Kato's case. Nevertheless, Parratt claims that he stirred controversy unnecessarily: 'It would probably be true to say that although the dominant tradition in African Protestant Christianity remains broadly conservative, the lines are much less sharply drawn than in the West. In this respect Kato introduced into the debate in Africa a largely foreign controversy.'⁹ The criticism begs some basic questions. If indeed the lines were not sharply drawn, perhaps some clarification was necessary, not in order to introduce a 'foreign controversy', but rather to focus issues that the church needed to face – rather

than evade – for the sake of its own well-being. From this perspective Kato's role was the prophetic one of confronting a theological trend that in his view threatened the future of vital Christianity in Africa. Paul similarly reprovved churches he had himself founded, introducing what might equally be termed 'largely foreign' controversies to confront serious declension. Nor was Christ a stranger to such polemic.

By his opposition to the AACC and theologians like Mbiti and Idowu, Kato was taking on the African ecclesiastical and theological establishment. He disagreed in print with those whose academic credentials were already established, risking opprobrium and ridicule. Bowers recalls that 'some reaction was vicious',¹⁰ and continues: 'A prominent religious newspaper in Eastern Africa ran a review which called *Pitfalls* "alarmist in what it says and colonial in the perspective in which it is written."' Kato was accused of being a tool 'in the preservation and protection of neo-colonial interests', an accusation echoed in later critiques. He was probably aware of the likely reaction to his critique of fellow African theologians, but his refusal to remain silent encouraged the numerically large but theologically diffident African evangelical movement to find its voice and articulate its own distinctive vision. He became a model for those who would follow.

Moreover, his polemic received additional impetus from another quarter, for he saw the threat of syncretism not only in contemporary theology but also in the growth of politically inspired movements of opposition to the church within some post-colonial African states.¹¹ One of these was Chad, where there was outright persecution of Christians who refused to participate in traditional initiation ceremonies. The Zaïrian church was also under pressure from the government-inspired movement of *authenticité*, although it did not experience the physical persecution that took place in Chad. Kato supported the stand of Chadian Christians who endured suffering rather than participate in traditional initiation rites. And there is a clear correspondence between what they were facing and the controversy he was engaged in; for the Chadian government's attempt to force the church into a syncretistic accommodation with African tradition, paralleled what Kato believed to be taking place more subtly at the theological level. The theological trend he was resisting had indeed the potential to undermine the principled stand of Chadian believers, by implying that the rites of traditional religion might indeed be grafted onto Christian practice without theological loss. Thus, by resisting what he saw as theological syncretism, Kato was simultaneously providing the Chadian church with a reasoned theological basis for its resistance to a State-imposed syncretism. Juxtaposing the two issues helps to explain the insistence, even the passion,

with which he stated his position, and the urgent priority, in his view, of a polemical theological approach as opposed, perhaps, to a more creative one.

It has been suggested that Kato changed his position shortly before his death. In *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* Mbiti claims that Kato's attack on himself and Idowu 'arose partly out of insufficient understanding on his part',¹² and that he discussed the issues with Kato on 9 December 1975, a little over a week before Kato's death. 'At the end he apologized for having unjustifiably attacked me, and promised to rewrite and change the relevant parts of the book [*Pitfalls*] ... I assume, he would have made personal apologies to those others whom he had attacked.' The story that Kato had apologised for the charge of incipient syncretism was circulating long before *Bible and Theology* was published, and Bowers, one of those who knew him personally, refers to it: 'Kato's friends were deeply upset at this report, which they knew to be untrue and which they felt attempted to emasculate at a stroke the heart of Kato's critique, at a time when Kato, conveniently enough, could no longer respond and set the record straight.'¹³ He claims rather that, 'in response to objections from Mbiti, Kato apologized for the wording of certain passages in *Pitfalls*, and undertook to make adjustments accordingly in two paragraphs in the book ... Kato made no deathbed recantations! He was still growing, but he was not changing directions.' It is indeed unlikely that Kato would so quickly have moderated his position on the basis of a single conversation with Mbiti, especially given the conviction that his writings demonstrate. Such changes as he made seem to have been few and minor, and had no impact on the thrust of his argument.

Controversy

Kato's literary corpus, and especially *Theological Pitfalls*, continues to provoke controversy. Perhaps the most frequent criticism focuses on an alleged surrender to a Western theological agenda over against a distinctively African approach. Oduyoye's assessment is representative in both content and tone: 'The rejection [of the] African worldview by an African shows how successful the Christian missions were in alienating Africans from their "Africanness".'¹⁴

What is principally in view in these criticisms is his negative evaluation of African traditional religion, and consequent rejection of any substantive role for it in the formulation of an African Christian theology. This is seen by his critics as a rejection of African culture, which would *ipso facto* eliminate all possibility of an African theology at anything but a superficial level: he failed, says Parratt, 'to make allowance for the fact that throughout its history Christianity has had to come to terms with the cultures in which it has been implanted.'¹⁵ Bediako offers the most developed critique, arguing that Kato's

insistence on the exclusive role of the Bible as a revelation of salvation coupled with his negative appraisal of African traditional religion, blinded him to the possibility that God may be working redemptively among those who have, or had, no access to the Bible. He critiques Kato's conception of the gospel as being ultimately – to use Bediako's term – *acultural*, 'a further dimension of his exclusivist Biblicism', and claims that for him 'no cultural factors had any part in the shaping of one's understanding of the Christian faith.'¹⁶ Criticism has also extended to his rejection of 'the politicisation of African theological thought to deal with issues of social injustice and political oppression'.¹⁷ Particularly in view here is his assessment of Black Theology.

Certainly Kato was committed to certain non-negotiable presuppositions which were fundamental to his thinking. Fundamental among them was the belief that the Bible was the unique Word of God, the ultimate source and authority for all legitimate theological expression, including African. Such a view will of course be problematic to those who do not hold it, but it has a venerable pedigree and not only in the West. Not the least aspect of that pedigree is the fact that both implicitly and explicitly the Scriptures themselves repeatedly insist on their own uniquely divine origin and consequent authority. He further believed that a biblical understanding of the gospel entailed an exclusivist approach towards other religions. Again, commitment to such a stance does not imply subservience to a Western agenda, any more than the adoption of an opposing inclusivist (or even pluralist) stance, which has equally strong roots within the Western theological tradition.

It is of course true that he studied in the West, and was undoubtedly influenced by Western thinking, but this is no less true of his critics. However that may be, dependence is all but inevitable in any academic field, for we stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. That does not of itself invalidate any particular position, and to argue otherwise would be to fall into the genetic fallacy: an argument is neither established nor negated by reference to its source, but only on the basis of its own intrinsic merits or weaknesses. Kato's thinking was no less cogent than that of his opponents. The issue is not his alleged submission to 'Western value-setting',¹⁸ but his theologically reasoned conviction that an 'African Christian self-identity' rooted to any extent in pre-Christian and non-Christian religious tradition was ultimately self-defeating, since it seriously compromised principles that lay at the heart of the gospel itself.

However, this did not mean that he was opposed to a specifically African expression of Christian faith – rather the contrary. If he distanced himself from the expression, 'African theology', it was because of the ambiguities which he

felt surrounded it at the time, but he emphatically approved the concern to formulate a Christian theology for Africa: 'that Africans have a unique contribution to make to theological debates is undeniable'.¹⁹ He shared the concern of Mbiti and others that 'mission Christianity' had failed to engage seriously with African culture, quoting Mbiti to that effect: 'Mission Christianity was not from the start prepared to face a serious encounter with either traditional religions and philosophy or the modern changes taking place in Africa. The church here now finds itself in the situation of trying to exist without a theology'.²⁰ Consequently he looked for a culturally appropriate expression of Christian faith which addressed the questions raised by African society and tradition: 'such areas as principles of interpretation, polygamy, family life, the spirit world, and communal life should be given serious attention.'²¹ Or, as he wrote elsewhere, 'the valuable concepts [of African culture] will of course be strengthened by his newly-found faith. The traditional belief in continuing existence after death is given a new and dynamic meaning. The respect for the elder falls in line with what the Bible teaches.'²²

Nevertheless, at the most fundamental level of African culture, he believed that there existed a philosophy 'as to the real meaning and purpose of life',²³ which was fundamentally incompatible with Christian faith. It was here that there had to be a radical break with traditional belief in favour, not of Western theology, but of the gospel itself. This was true for any convert to Christianity of whatever culture, because the gospel ultimately transcends and challenges all cultures, while its domestication vitiates its essential integrity. This is the point Kato insists on: 'must one betray Scriptural principles of God and His dealing with man at the altar of any regional theology?'²⁴ In this sense, then, he certainly held the gospel to be *acultural*, which does not, however, negate the need for suitable cultural articulations of it. But, if words such as 'gospel' and 'Christianity' are to be used in anything approaching a univocal sense across cultures, there must necessarily be some unchanging core of meaning, whatever the culture in which they find expression. Of course, one can adopt a minimalist or a maximalist definition of that core. There is equally the danger that elements would be drawn into any such definition that belong more properly to particular cultural expressions of the gospel in a given context. However, if there is ultimately no *acultural* gospel at all – infinitely translatable no doubt, but an objective and unchanging reality which exists precisely to be translated – it makes little sense to speak of *the* gospel or *the* Christian faith in any universal and transcultural sense at all.

Nor was Kato silent about social and political issues. Interviewed by *Christianity Today*, a journal addressed to the American public, he spoke in a way that many readers would have found uncongenial: 'we must appreciate the

call for a kind of socialism because capitalism has become a real curse in Africa and the gap between the haves and the have-nots continues to widen. In Africa today you will find many millionaires but also many people who go to bed hungry.²⁵ Elsewhere he condemned the past oppression of African peoples, writing that 'enslavement of Africans by whites is probably the worst evil done by one class of people to another.'²⁶ In the same article he condemned the racial discrimination then being practised in Southern Rhodesia, South Africa and the United States, and continued, 'while I do not agree with the proponents of Black Theology ... I fully identify myself with their condemnation of injustice. The search for human dignity is a Scriptural principle.'²⁷ His quarrel with some contemporary theological approaches to socio-political issues was not their concern for justice, but his belief that they confused the fruit of salvation with its substance, which was the thrust of his critique of the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1976.²⁸

Vision

Kato was not just a reactive controversialist – he was also a visionary. As general secretary of the AEAM, a position he held for less than three years, he presided over a significant strengthening of the evangelical movement in Africa. One indication of this was an increase from 7 to 16 in the number of national evangelical bodies affiliated to the AEAM.²⁹ Moreover, although the primary focus of his ministry was on the provision of an authentically Christian theology for Africa, he had also a missionary passion for spreading the gospel in Africa and beyond – even in the West. At the beginning of the twenty-first century missionary endeavour is increasingly initiated by African churches. In the early 1970s that was not so much the case, but Kato saw its vital importance for the health of the church and its future growth. He was ahead of his time when he urged his readers to 'look beyond the borders of your country and further afield to the pagan strongholds on our continent, to the western world and its materialistic attractions. The world is the field. The church in Africa and elsewhere is the only agent for sowing the seed.'³⁰

But, most significantly, he used his position to promote the cause of theological education within the evangelical constituency. He knew that evangelical churches lagged behind others in theological development, the result, to some extent at least, of a suspicion of higher theological education on the part of some of their missionary founders. Turaki refers to Kato's 'difficulties in persuading SIM and ECWA of the need for higher education and quality leadership training.'³¹ What made the need increasingly urgent was the huge growth of the church coupled with rapid social change across Africa producing an increasingly urban population and a growing middle class.

Evangelicalism would not flourish unless its leadership was able to respond effectively to the issues confronting the church in the postcolonial era. So, he urged the need to expand, deepen and strengthen 'every possible means of teaching the church', 'particularly at the highest leadership levels',³² and sought to move ahead in a number of areas.

First, and most crucial, was the establishment of institutions of advanced theological education by the AEAM itself. He argued that francophone Africa should be given the priority as the English-speaking countries already had far more seminaries and Bible schools.³³ Plans were therefore laid for the foundation of a theological school in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, a vision which materialised in 1977 with the *Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui* (FATEB). Subsequently a parallel Anglophone institution was founded in Nairobi, the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), which received its first students in 1983. These have become training institutions of critical importance for the evangelical African church. Second, he proposed raising standards in existing evangelical institutions through a theological accrediting agency. He was working on this shortly before his death, and it became a reality in 1976 when the AEAM formally constituted the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA). He also hoped to see the establishment of an evangelical theological journal for the whole of Africa and an association of evangelical theologians. None of this was the vision of a man wedded to a Western agenda and indifferent or opposed to a distinctively African theology. Finally, less visible perhaps than the establishment of such institutions but no less significant – and still remembered by many – was the warm personal encouragement and help he gave to younger aspiring African theologians, passing on his vision for the growth to theological maturity of the African church. 'Through his vision and wide personal contacts [he] formatively impacted the following generation of African evangelical leadership.'³⁴

Byang Kato was only 39 when he died. His relatively brief life's work was seminal in the development of evangelical theology in Africa, through the example of his own scholarship, the visionary initiatives that led to the foundation of enduring institutions, and the encouragement of the rising generation. He set the agenda for African evangelicalism and, according to Tiéno, it is still largely his vision that 'provides the basic framework for such strategy as a whole in our continent.'³⁵ Since his death he has been harshly and unjustly criticised, but he was no pawn of missionaries or of Western parachurch bodies, nor the neo-colonial spokesman of Western theology. He was a 'twentieth century prophet, somewhat in the school of an earlier African, Tertullian, for while he identified with black Africa in its cry for liberation

against unjust oppression, he was fearless in his denunciation of all liberal theology and philosophy that deviated from the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.³⁶ The goal of his work was to advance the ambition vibrantly expressed in his famed rallying cry, 'Let African Christians be Christian Africans'. It is not only a fitting epitaph, but also a continuing challenge to the evangelical African church today.³⁷

End Notes

¹ Shaw, M., *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), p. 278.

² Bowers, P., 'Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy', *TrinJ* 1 NS (1980), p. 86.

³ WCC, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund, 1970-77* (Bromley: T.E.F. Fund, 1972).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵ Parratt, J., *Reinventing Christianity: African Christian Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 195.

⁶ Kato, B., *African Cultural Revolution* (Jos, Nigeria: Challenge Publications, 1976), p. 54.

⁷ Bediako, K., *Theology and Identity: the Impact of Culture on Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 412.

⁸ Bowers, 'Evangelical Theology', p. 85.

⁹ Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 63, note 29.

¹⁰ Bowers, 'Evangelical Theology', p. 86.

¹¹ Cf., for example, Kato, *African Cultural Revolution*, pp. 22-24.

¹² Mbiti, J. S., *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 48.

¹³ Bowers, P., 'Review of Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*', *Themelios* 5.3, May 1980, p. 34.

- ¹⁴ Oduyoye, M. A., *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), p. 62. Cf. Bediako, p. 387; Mugambi, J. N. K., *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1989), p. 133; Parratt, pp. 62-63.
- ¹⁵ Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 63.
- ¹⁶ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, p. 413.
- ¹⁷ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, p. 394; cf. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, p. 61.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, p. 391.
- ¹⁹ Kato, B., 'Theological Anemia in Africa', *Biblical Christianity in Africa*. (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1985), p. 11.
- ²⁰ Mbiti, J. S., quoted by Kato, B., 'Theological Anemia', p. 11.
- ²¹ Kato, B., 'Black Theology and African Theology', *ERT* 1 (1977), p. 45.
- ²² Kato, B., *African Cultural Revolution*, pp. 19-20.
- ²³ *Ibid*, p. 30.
- ²⁴ Kato, B., *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House), p. 16.
- ²⁵ Kato, B., 'Africa's Christian Future', *Christianity Today* XX.1 (1975), p. 14.
- ²⁶ Kato, B., 'Black Theology and African Theology', p. 36.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 37.
- ²⁸ Kato, B., 'The World Council of Churches Nairobi Assembly', *Perception* 5 (1976), pp.2-10.
- ²⁹ Bremen, C., 'A Portrait of Dr. Byang Kato', *AJET* 15.2, 1996, p. 145.
- ³⁰ Kato, B., 'Christianity as an African Religion', *ERT* 4.1 (1980), p. 39.
- ³¹ Turaki, Y., 'The Theological Legacy of the Reverend Doctor Byang Kato', *AJET* 20.2 (2001), p. 151.

³² Kato, B., 'Theological Anemia', p. 13.

³³ Bremen, 'A Portrait', p. 141.

³⁴ Bowers, P., 'Kato, Byang Henry', in Moreau, A. Scott (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Baker Books and Paternoster, 2000), p. 535.

³⁵ Tiénou, T., *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1990), p. 17.

³⁶ Nicholls, B. J., 'Byang H. Kato - A Personal Tribute', *Theological News* (WEF), Vol. 8 No. 1 (January-March 1976), p. 2. I am grateful to Dr Nicholls for sending me a photocopy of this issue of *Theological News*.

³⁷ I wish to thank Dr Paul Bowers, Miss Ailish Eves and Dr Gordon Molyneux for reading this paper and making many helpful suggestions.

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