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Christian Intellectual Responsibilities in Modern Africa

2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures 2

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AN INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE

In honouring the memory of Byang Kato through these lectures, one particular characteristic of the man that is worthy of special notice was his intention both to speak for and to live out, within his African context, the biblical summons to a *discipleship of the mind*. Kato was committed to a faith that has become mature and effective not least because it is intellectually engaged within its context. One consequence of this commitment was that Kato was, among other things, the first African evangelical to attempt to engage the theological issues of modern Africa's intellectual life. I wish to suggest that Kato's example in this respect constitutes a challenge in our day, especially to those of us engaged in theological education in Africa, a challenge that has yet to be fully addressed.

The African evangelical community, at least at its more popular levels, may not always be especially oriented to the *intellectual* responsibilities of true Christian discipleship. It is more a worthy exemplar of witness and

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celebration, of vitality and social engagement. But those of us who find ourselves invested in the strategic ministry of quality theological education in Africa do also care about responsibilities of the mind.

Kato's challenge, however, was not only for responsible theological life, important as that is. His challenge was also for a responsible theological engagement with our African *intellectual context.* On that particular point we have not done so well. Indeed it might be said that generally speaking we who serve in the evangelical theological colleges of Africa are scarcely aware of the higher levels of African intellectual life today, its patterns, its inner fixations, its scope. This is largely unknown territory for contemporary African evangelical reflection. We will not find articles in our theological journals, nor courses in our graduate schools, nor discourse at our academic conferences, nor texts from our leading publishers on this topic. And this is so despite the considerable role that this dimension of African life plays on the continent, and despite the range of academic literature already devoted to it. We have been focused on other important matters.

In African evangelical reflection we have been much engaged, and to good purpose, in the discourse of *cultural contextualisation* and its theological implications. But here I am pointing to a different discourse. Whereas the evangelical communities of Europe and North America devote unremitting attention to the intellectual trends of their contexts, and to the challenges that these trends represent for them, no such comparable critical attention exists within our African evangelical community to the *intellectual* trends of our own particular context.

In Africa we as evangelical believers do not face what fellow believers in the west face in terms of intellectual challenges; we do not face a rampant individualism, affluence on a scale that is corrupting, an ascendant post-modernity, an aggressive secularism. These are the necessary intellectual preoccupations of western Christians who seek to be faithful to God's truth in their context. On the African continent we face other basic intellectual drives, other habits of the mind that have controlled the continent's intellectual life, that have in fact become instinctive and unassailable for a century and more, perceptions that will also play a major role in determining Africa's future in this coming century, for better or worse. In terms of intellectual life, Africa actually has its own thing going. At all levels our context is affected by African intellectual modernity, and we ourselves are affected as well. And yet as evangelicals we have hardly begun to tune in to its distinctive contours. We need to do our homework; we must not expect others to do it for us.

The evangelical community in Africa has certainly been intellectually active. The *Africa Bible Commentary* is an extraordinary achievement. The *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* is into its 27th year of publication. Our dominant theological discourse on contextualisation, on the interface between Christianity and traditional African culture, represents a laudably vibrant and fruitful intellectual life in our midst. But modern Africa's intellectual life has remained a largely uncharted territory for us, in contrast to the secular academic world where it is an organised field of inquiry. The sorts of resources that I have in mind would include such recent publications as those by Toyin Falola of Nigeria, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (2003); Paul Zeleza of Zimbabwe, *Rethinking Africa's Globalization: The Intellectual Challenges* (2003); and Messay Kebede of Ethiopia, *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* (2004). This is a field of academic exploration extending back to such earlier classics as those by Robert July, *The Origins of Modern African Thought* (1967), and Claude Wauthier, *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa* (1966). I am suggesting that this crucial component of our African context we do not know, and have yet to engage with effectively.

One consequence of this lack of engagement with the thought world of modern Africa is that the African university communities and the educated elite of Africa are often barely addressed by biblical truth in its full richness and depth and relevance for the life of the mind. And across the continent one can readily find highly educated African Christians functioning in the professional and academic worlds of modern Africa who often live dichotomized intellectual and spiritual lives, devoted to Christ in their personal life and witness, but functioning by alternative more secular interpretive commitments in their public professional life.

In such a situation one can but welcome the recent emergence of Christian universities in different parts of the continent. The potential that these new centres of learning represent is indeed heartening. Whether they will begin effectively to address this intellectual need is yet to be seen. Will their Christian character be evidenced mostly only by Christian ownership and by Christian staffing, or will they also become centres of vibrant, integrated Christian thinking, where the Christian worldview becomes closely engaged with African intellectual modernity across all disciplines?

We can thank God for the Lesslie Newbigin, the John Stott or the Ravi Zacharias, who at different periods and in their various ways have aided God's people in the west in discerning how best to maintain a biblical mindset and

godly witness amidst the often enticing and deceptive intellectual cross-currents of their modern world. But here we live in modern Africa, amidst ideological trends, assumptions and commitments that directly shape the life of the continent, amidst habits of the mind that are not entirely compatible with a thought-life taken captive to Jesus Christ, amidst hungers of the heart that can too easily produce altars of the mind aligned to other lordships. But where amongst us are our own Newbigin or Stott or Zacharias to help us in faithfully addressing our own intellectual world? How are we to understand and interpret the intellectual realities of our modern Africa, how develop a vibrant, winsome theological life that is effectively engaged with this powerful component of our context, so that the blessings of Christ's lordship may be fully experienced in our midst?

MODERN AFRICA

If we were to attempt a quick introductory understanding of the particularities of modern Africa's intellectual life, where does one begin? Granted that such an attempt must inevitably involve an excess of generalisation and simplification, perhaps the best place to start is by focusing on modern Africa. And the first essential thing to point out about modern Africa would be that within recent years Africa has entered a new era.

It has been customary to divide Africa's modern history almost automatically into three major phases, namely the pre-colonial period, the colonial period and the post-colonial independence period. That is how we customarily think of modern African history. But in some major respects that is becoming an insufficient way of framing things. It appears that in fact we are no longer in the post-colonial independence era. We have by now entered a fourth era in modern Africa's history. Understanding this, and factoring for its implications, not least in our intellectual lives, has consequences. The times have shifted. At the global level the year 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that followed, has come to be recognised as the end of an era for the entire post-World War II global order. But for Africa it is becoming increasingly apparent that the vital years between 1989 and 1994 will also likely come to be seen as a watershed time of transition, as *the end of one era for Africa, and the beginning of another.*

That is to say, in some consequential respects the post-colonial 'independence era' of modern African history has now run out, and another era has commenced. Not everyone has noticed it yet, it is not clear what the new era should be called, and it is certainly not yet clear what the new era will

entail for Africa. But the old post-colonial order is certainly no longer functioning. It has played itself out. More particularly the old familiar interpretations no longer apply. And within elite African intellectual circles the assumptions that have ruled since independence seem increasingly to lack plausibility and efficacy. A sense of ideological exhaustion and pessimism has emerged, even intellectual despair. A shift of intellectual perspective has begun to leave its traces in the relevant professional literature As the Ethiopian scholar Messay Kebede says of today's African intellectual elites: "The poetry is gone, and cynicism is the general attitude." Which reminds us also of the Nigerian novelist Achebe's haunting words to his fellow Africans: "We have lost the 20th Century for ourselves; are we intent on losing the 21st Century for our children?"

It is a new time, and one that has begun to demand new thinking and new assessments, as Africa has come to face an extraordinary combination of new circumstances. What are some of these extraordinary new circumstances? Any list would certainly need to include the following:

⋄ The collapse of the bi-polar international world order, beginning in 1989 (until which time Africa's most effective strategy in international diplomacy had often been to play the non-aligned card).

⋄ The discrediting of socialist economic theory since 1989 (which until then had been favoured in large stretches of post-colonial independent Africa).

⋄ The disappearance of a common enemy (with the collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and Mandela's accession in 1994).

⋄ The unprecedented ravages of the AIDS plague, unprecedented human rights abuses (as in Rwanda and Sudan), and the emergence of the exceptional phenomenon of 'failed states' (as with Liberia until recently, and Somalia still).

⋄ The increasing marginalization of Africa in world strategic planning and in world consciousness, (even as the rest of the world becomes increasingly integrated).

⋄ And dare we add, in an entirely different dimension, the growing realisation in many venues of learning, as well as in Christian circles, and even in the secular media, that—to an entirely unanticipated degree, and despite everything else affecting the continent—Africa is rapidly

becoming one of the principal centres of world Christianity, with all that that entails.

⬥ Finally, for our purposes a deeply consequential outcome of these other developments, one that we dare not ignore, is that in our day the entire *intellectual* project of post-colonial independent Africa is increasingly being called into question in Africa, as no longer matching to modern African realities and no longer efficacious for addressing Africa's future.

Let me now explore this last factor with you, by an abbreviated sketch of the historical dynamics of modern African intellectual life.

MODERN AFRICAN INTELLECTUAL LIFE

1. Social/historical dynamics

It is commonly agreed that at the heart of Africa's intellectual life for much of the past century has been the distinctive issue of *African identity*. Why so? This is not the dominant characteristic of intellectual life for other continents of the world. But this has been the characteristic theme for *this* continent, the inner motif, the ruling mindset. The core question has been: *What does it mean to be African?* What is entailed, what required, what implied?

This question has been worked out most specifically in terms of achieving a separate identity from the west. How can Africa not only achieve political independence from the west but also wrest independence from western *intellectual* hegemony? How are we to enact our separate African identity in all fields of inquiry? The intellectual life of Africa has largely shaped itself around this overarching quest, a quest that has functioned as the principal dynamic of Africa's intellectual life in almost all fields of learning and expression during the 20th century.

How did this come to be? Perhaps we can better understand the dynamics of this movement, both its power and its limitations, by probing its social/historical origins, which are rather simply told. The indigenous cultures of pre-colonial Africa had not only their traditional rulers but as well their traditional intelligentsia. A key impact of colonialism was that it largely disempowered these traditional elites and rendered them seemingly superfluous. That was part of what Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was about.

Along with this outcome was a second powerful, but unintended, consequence of colonialism, namely the emergence of the new African elite, the western-educated African (e.g. Azikwe, Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Nyerere). As a class this group emerged by successful accommodation to the West through western education. They then used just that advantage to organise the demise of the colonial system and to become Africa's new ruling class, distinct from the colonial regimes which they had overthrown, but also distinct, as it happens, from Africa's earlier traditional rulers and intelligentsia whom they now displaced. It is this new group, the modern African educated elite, who shaped post-colonial modern Africa, and who continue to shape modern African intellectual life.

Essential to understanding these developments is to notice that modern Africa's intelligentsia emerged by superior assimilation to the west (culturally), and then came to power by rejection of the west (politically). Functioning between two worlds as it were, being neither entirely traditional African nor entirely modern European, they were thus, as Nehru of India put it, "out of place everywhere, at home nowhere". So they proceeded to refashion Africa into their own image, to remake it into their home, neither traditional Africa nor modern Europe, but *modern Africa*. It is this group, the modern African educated elite, that has determined the shape of modern Africa. And it is hence their values, anxieties, preoccupations, and dreams, which have everywhere dominated the intellectual life of modern Africa, and which clarify its particular configurations.

Modern African intellectual life therefore reflects its generative centre, the modern African educated elite caught between two worlds, and therefore asking: *what does it mean to be a modern African?* It is for this reason that the question of identity informs the sub-structure of most advanced levels of organised reflection. This has been true in the novels and plays of modern Africa, the academic journals and the newspaper editorials, the lectures and debates of university life, the books on African history and political science and educational theory and sociology, and not least the textbooks provided for primary and secondary schooling across the continent.

2. A defining matrix

In understanding modern African social dynamics as they relate to its intellectual life, it is essential to recognise the formative part played by Africa's pervasive, problematic encounter with Europe, with the west, both in the colonial era and also in the post-colonial independence era. The overarching patterns of modern Africa's *intellectual* life are best interpreted

not primarily in terms of some defining common culture evident throughout the continent, but in terms of this common modern historical experience for Africa. This interpretive approach to African intellectual modernity points not only to the encounter with Europe, but as well to the fundamentally bi-polar, double-sided response of African societies in modern times to that prolonged encounter. That combination within Africa's modern history, namely (a) Africa's pervasive problematic experience with Europe, together with (b) Africa's pervasive double-sided response to that experience, may be seen as the defining matrix of modern Africa's intellectual life.

We are all familiar with Africa's encounter with Europe in modern history. But let me unpack somewhat further what is seen as Africa's double-sided response in that encounter. Western cultural influence is perceived to have worked out in African societies in two contrasting respects. On the one hand, both under colonialism and with the arrival of independence, Africa's people have everywhere demonstrated a drive to acquire and incorporate all that might be of use from the west. In this respect western culture has functioned, for better or worse, as a vast transformative cultural stimulant on the continent. People wanted much of what the west had to offer, and they organised themselves to get it by whatever means might work. That was true of course during the colonial period. But throughout the more recent period of political independence as well, African peoples everywhere have embraced a shared commitment to national 'development', to a progressive modernisation of all economic, political and social systems. Under the rubric of development or modernisation, Africa has thus pursued and enacted social institutions everywhere that have derived not from traditional Africa but directly from western models.

Think with me here of such familiar components of our modern African society as the labour unions; the entire educational apparatus; the civil service; the political structures; the economic structures; the postal service; the military; our transportation facilities (roads, airlines); the health services; and especially communications (newspapers, radio, TV, cell phones, and now the internet). The evidence is everywhere pervasive and unavoidable. In this respect what colonialism had begun, African nations set themselves to complete, albeit on their own terms, as part of their own agenda, for the benefit of their own people. Although we almost never acknowledge this abundantly evident reality of modern Africa, certainly almost never in our familiar contextualization discourse, nevertheless this enacted and facilitated 'westernisation' is a core aspect of the modern African social context.

At the same time Africa has been characterised by an overwhelming commitment to self-direction, to a revival of interest in Africa's heritage, a need to seek and explicate an African identity and 'authenticity' over against the domineering influence of Europe, and therefore a determination to critique and renounce the west, and to affirm Africa's traditional life and culture, to assert African distinctive dignity and worth. This commitment to selfhood, this need for self-distinction over against the west, this resistance to its unwelcome political, economic, and cultural embrace, has functioned as a fundamental dynamic of African self-reflection for the past century. It too is a core aspect of modern African social reality.

3. Voices and feet

Carrying forward our too abbreviated analysis, it is important to notice that this alternating response - as one scholar put it, this "rhythm of attraction and repulsion" toward the west, has worked itself out on the continent in a distinctive manner. Here in essence is the unusual pattern that has been in play. On the one hand the determination to assert separate identity from the west, to renounce the west, and to affirm Africa's traditional heritage, is to be found everywhere EXPLICIT AND ARTICULATED in modern Africa. So much so that we hardly notice it. And on the other hand, and simultaneously, we find everywhere IMPLICIT AND ENACTED in modern Africa a determination to take over as much of the benefits of western culture and technology as possible, an almost indiscriminate westernisation, a characteristic that is demonstrably pervasive throughout modern African society. So much so that we hardly notice it. In an important sense there is a paradox at work in society, one tendency articulated but rarely enacted, and the contrary tendency enacted but rarely articulated.

Hence there would seem to be a double-tide at work in the foundational realities of modern Africa, a *vocalized* orientation and an *enacted* orientation, the voices and the feet we might say, finding each their own separate way. It is the articulate *voices* of Africa's intellectual class that are ever effectively critiquing Europe and its influence on Africa, that are ever elaborating Africa's separate identity from the west, evident in university lectures, the published symposia, the set curricula and textbooks of public education, the newspaper editorials. And it is the enacted *feet* of Africa, of the ordinary citizenry of Africa, steadily pursuing westernised modernity, evident everywhere in the market place, in the minibuses, in the school uniforms, in ordinary home furnishings, and not least on local television. In an important sense one might say that the articulate voice of Africa speaks in one direction,

while the innovative feet of Africa move in the other direction. This is of course an over-simplification; it is not all that there is to modern Africa; things are far more complex. But surfacing this aspect of African reality may help us in understanding where modern African *intellectual life* fits in, its particular role in modern Africa, its vitalities, and also its limitations.

For the intellectual life of Africa is nothing if it is not the *voice* of Africa, ever articulating African authenticity, African self-reliance, Africa's distinct identity, combined with a vigorous, sophisticated and effective critique of the west and its role in Africa. This commitment to a separate African identity over against the west is commonly recognised in the academic literature as the root integrating motif of the African nationalist ideology which enabled the achievement of independence for much of the continent in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and which has dominated all venues of political life since. But just this theme of achieving separate African identity also underlies the principal intellectual developments in African literature, African art, history, sociology, political science, economics, philosophy, jurisprudence, educational theory - and theology. In each of these areas the available literature is now vast, and the achievements have been extraordinary. Africa has indeed taken charge of its own intellectual life, and of the interpretation of its own realities.

4. African identity

Perhaps this is the way to analyze things, perhaps not quite. But in some important sense this is the way things are. And given these dynamics, perhaps we can thus arrive at a better understanding of why the dominant theme of Africa's intellectual life for the past century has been the issue of *African identity*. This is not characteristic of the intellectual life of other continents. The intellectual life of other continents marches to other themes, other necessities, other habits of the mind. But for this continent, our continent, this is the characteristic theme, the inner motif, the ruling mindset: *what does it mean to be African?* What is entailed, what required, what implied?

And, so crucial to our interests as African evangelical believers, it is directly out of this intellectual matrix that, beginning in the early 1960s, the African Theology movement emerged and took its form. This is the underlying explanation for the way it shaped itself, the direction it adopted. The characteristic preoccupations of African Theology, the implicit agendas, the necessary themes, even the rooted conflicts and discontinuities of African Theology, have almost exactly matched the dynamics of the larger intellectual life that has been distinctive of modern Africa.

Thus if the African intellectual is asking: what does it mean to be African, then African Theology set itself to answer: what does it mean to be an African Christian? If the African intellectual looks to Africa's traditional cultural heritage to explain its distinctness, African Theology proposed to look to Africa's traditional *religious* heritage for framing its own distinctive identity. How do we as African Christians legitimate ourselves amidst Africa's assertion of distinction from the west, how do we as African Christians explain ourselves in relation to modern Africa's insistent affirmation of its traditional heritage? For the Idowu and Mbiti among us, the Mugambi and Bediako of Christian Africa, answering these questions has been taken to be the defining task of African Theology, the essential theological project. The African intellectual quest has been taken as the proper framing for the African theological quest.

5. African realities

But lying at the base of Africa's vocalised intellectual life remains a critical deficiency, and one that is increasingly being acknowledged. Namely, that for all its evident usefulness Africa's intellectual life has not sufficiently addressed the full scope of modern African realities. Granted its awesome achievements, nevertheless African intellectual discourse has been leaving a massive gap in addressing the realities of Africa. For what is to be done with the *feet* of Africa? Who is speaking to the inherent realities of Africa's feet, to their necessities, their relentless quest for modernisation? Make no mistake, modern Africa is not traditional Africa. And to be forever elaborating the distinction of Africa from the west can only take us so far in the realities of the modern world.

The ever-evident realities are that modern Africa is pervasively affected by traditional Africa, and yet it is not traditional Africa. And it is also pervasively affected by the west, and yet it is not the west. It is a unique combination, neither traditional Africa nor modern Europe, but *modern Africa*. Rare as it is to hear anyone ever saying this, nevertheless it is almost impossible to find any part of contemporary Africa that is not now substantively affected by westernisation. And it is almost impossible to find any part of contemporary Africa that is not still substantively affected by traditional Africa. For this reason, you cannot understand Africa without understanding traditional Africa. And likewise (strange as it may sound) you cannot understand Africa any longer without understanding the west.

And yet, so consequential to what we are attempting to assess here, the *intellectual* dynamics of the continent to which we have been accustomed

have tended to focus exclusively on establishing Africa's distinct identity over against the west, while letting Africa's self-directed westernisation happen without effective intellectual acknowledgement and inquiry. This apparently contradictory situation would seem to be so because the intelligentsia, the elite of Africa's intellectual world, are themselves in their very own persons, in their very own achievements and status, often the primary examples of successful westernization in Africa. With the result, it would seem, that while their own feet in fact point one way, and emphatically so, in necessary compensation their voices must be heard ever more emphatically and articulately speaking in the other direction. A double-tide is at work, affirming in one direction, while proceeding in the other. With the inevitably debilitating result that only half of Africa's contemporary reality has been addressed by Africa's dominant intellectual discourse.

6. Evaluations

As evidence has persisted and increased that the post-independence scheme of things in Africa is no longer delivering, an era of reassessment is seemingly emerging among Africa's thinkers and planners. A suspicion is increasingly heard that at the root of much of Africa's problems today is not least *a failed ideology.* Perhaps Africa's problems are not just poor leadership, not just multiple calamities, and not just western economic imperialism, impactful as each of these has been. Rather a principal problem may also be a dominant intellectual ideology that has lost its efficacy.

In many respects Africa's dominant intellectual ideology since the 1950s has been right in what it affirms, and useful in what it has achieved. But awkwardly enough, this ideology no longer matches modern African realities. It fails to generate constructive critical reflection on what was not good as well as what was good in traditional Africa, nor constructive critical reflection on what may be good as well as not good in the continent's pervasive westernisation. Hence there is no effective critical ideological undergirding for the entire process of economic and social development and modernisation, which is nevertheless central to the life of most African countries since independence.

Equally consequential, and worthy of equal notice, is that this ideological perspective fails to position Africa effectively for addressing its future within the modern world order. Within the modern world order of the 21st Century, forever asserting one's distinctness, one's difference, one's independence, is insufficient for functioning to one's own best good in what is now a global community. To continue to build an intellectual ideology of African identity

grounded solely on the premise of *difference* will not and cannot ultimately serve Africa's longer-term interests.

The reality of the 21st Century is that we are now part of a global village, for better or worse, unavoidably. Our ideology must now be such as to equip us somehow to function fruitfully as a part of that global community. The suggestion being considered, however tentatively, is that the old nationalist ideology that brought about African independence and that has dominated African habits of the mind for so long *is in fact now inadequate for taking Africa into a viable future*.

Certainly *dependence* will not serve Africa. It must be rejected, as indeed it has been. But mere *independence* will also not suffice. Within the global village that we now inhabit, Africa must find ways to move beyond the confinements inherent in such ideological commitments. Only an ideology of self-directed *interdependence* can effectively serve in addressing Africa's future.

Africa must not give up guarding its hard-won independence. Nor should it forget its rich cultural heritage. Nor should it submerge its distinctive identity. Rather the challenge for Africa today is to go *beyond* the older quest for an independent identity, and incorporate that now within a larger ideology for achieving Africa's constructive participation in the world community. For if Africa is not to become an active participant in the emerging global village, what other role can be in store for it?

7. Implications

And why does all this matter, why should it matter? It matters for us not least because the intellectual movement we call 'African Theology', the principal *intellectual* project of African Christianity for the past half century, arose not as a critical engagement with the dominant intellectual life of Africa, but directly as a sub-set of all these intellectual instincts, discomforts, preoccupations and commitments that we have been discussing. The African Theology project evolved itself from within the framing of this larger intellectual quest, as a subordinate component. And to the extent that it has done so, it therefore now also carries within itself all of these consequential deficiencies and limitations that affect the larger movement.

And where does that leave us as evangelical believers amidst the dominant intellectual life, the prevailing ideology, of our continent? Ideology is always in some measure an enchantment, *anywhere*, not just in Africa; a unifying meta-narrative, a constructive mystification provided by our social context.

And the faithful believer is meant to recognise it as such, and to assess and critique it thoughtfully. This is by no means an easy task. But a Christian committed to a discipleship of the mind, to letting every thought be taken captive to Jesus Christ, must do so.

The reigning intellectual ideologies of the secular west are not a legitimate grounding for western Christian intellectual endeavours. Nor are the dominant intellectual trends of Asia a legitimate foundation for Asian Christian intellectual endeavour. So also the reigning intellectual ideology of post-colonial nationalist Africa was not and is not a legitimate grounding for African Christian intellectual endeavours. Believers anywhere are meant to understand and engage their intellectual context for Christ, not simply be co-opted by that intellectual context. This is fundamental to our calling, if we are to be faithful to the biblical witness. *The distinctive theological task for African Christianity therefore is not to find the way to fit Christianity appropriately within the African intellectual project, but to find the way to fit Africa appropriately within the Christian intellectual project.*

This was the reason for the difference between Kato and the majority in the African Theology movement of his day. And I am proposing that in our day as evangelicals in Africa we will only get our bearings for how we should assess the ongoing discourse of African Theology, and how engage it, if we take a clear, critically realistic perspective on the cross-currents of modernity and traditionalism in Africa, on how they shape the intellectual life of Africa, how they generate often contradictory intellectual fashions, and how they affect our own thinking.

For this purpose the contextualisation discourse so familiar within our African evangelical circles is insufficient. Granted its innumerable benefits and insights, the contextualisation discussion as commonly pursued has not provided the bearings needed for this inquiry, because it works from an excessive focus on Africa's traditional context rather than the complexities of the modern African context, and because in doing so the contextual significance of African intellectual modernity has essentially eluded it. In consequence it also misreads the African Theology movement, understanding it as but another version of the contextualisation discussion, which it is not. With the result that African evangelical reflection can often itself become little more than a milder, more gracious version of the African Theology project.

We will only get our bearings as faithful believers within the modern African context if we decline to be swept along by the intellectual fashions that dominate that context, while also understanding and engaging them. It is

this I suggest that we must recognise and understand if we are to understand modern Africa, and Christian intellectual responsibilities in modern Africa.

AFRICAN THEOLOGY

This overarching way of framing our reflection now allows, I suggest, a fresh and productive approach in understanding and interpreting 'African Theology', the movement that has functioned as the principal *intellectual* project of African Christianity for the past half century. It may be relevant to mention at this point my overall treatment of this movement published in the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, under the title "African Theology: Its History, Dynamics, Scope and Future" (*AJET* 21.2 [2002] pp 109-125). That article provides useful background for this presentation. It happens that I have also taught a course on African Theology, at both post-graduate and doctoral levels, for the past thirty years, in Africa and overseas. Students at Igbaja in Nigeria asked me to teach the first such course back in 1977, and I have just taught a course on African Theology earlier this year at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology in Addis.

My particular slant both in my written contributions and in such courses has been to interpret the African Theology movement specifically by situating it within the larger frame of Africa's intellectual life, as I am doing here. I am proposing that this is the essential context for understanding the African Theology movement. This approach to understanding African Theology is by no means a common approach. But it is, I believe, a more historically grounded and intellectually realistic approach, and one that can prove fruitfully clarifying. It can also lead to challenging insights about our Christian intellectual responsibilities today in light of these realities.

1. What is it?

Tracing out the history of this Christian intellectual movement in Africa would lead immediately to the earliest generation of participants in the 1960s, to Harry Sawyerr of Sierra Leone, to Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria, to John Mbiti of Kenya. Mbiti in particular continued to provide singularly articulate, substantive, and prolific contributions over the years. More recently one has encountered such names as Nyamiti of Tanzania, Pobee and Bediako of Ghana, Mugambi of Kenya, and many others, predominantly from Roman Catholic scholarly communities and those of mainline ecumenical orientation. An entire body of literature has developed, with annotated bibliographies, collections of papers, readers in principal sources, and surveys of the entire literature. Since I have already surveyed the African Theology movement as a

whole in the published material just mentioned, rather than repeating everything available there, let me here attempt to carry discussion forward by asking a sobering question, namely: w*hy did this very needed project go wrong?* To the extent that it represents a noble but flawed endeavour, in which particulars has it proven to be flawed?

2. Why did it go wrong?

Let me specify two substantive assessments, two judgments, on why the African Theology movement went wrong, namely: (i) that African Theology largely mis-framed its foundational question; and (ii) that African Theology then generally attended to only half of the foundational question that it had framed for itself.

Speaking to the first of these assessments, the development of theological reflection suited to the needs and particularities of the African context should be recognised as an essential, and indeed as a biblically-warranted, task. I certainly believe so. And so did Kato. Theological contextualisation matters. African theological reflection matters. But the historical reality is that the intellectual movement we call 'African Theology' worked itself out primarily not from any biblical warrants but from other extraneous criteria. The task should have been pursued, and could have been pursued, as derivative of, as a sub-set of, African Christianity's biblical commitments. But instead this particular intellectual project within African Christianity formulated itself as a derivative of the secular nationalist intellectual commitments of its context. And in doing so it mistook its fundamental task and sadly went off course.

In the nature of the case the defining matrix out of which a valid African Christian theology is to be constructed, and against which its achievements should be measured, is neither Africa's traditional religions, nor Africa's cultural context, nor Africa's modern intellectual quest, important as each of these may be. These have in fact functioned in combination as primal reference points for the African Theology movement. But as Professor Tite Tiénou and others have proposed, the nature of the enterprise requires that the defining matrix should instead be the present Christian community of Africa, with the full range of its needs and expectations, its requirements and preoccupations, as it seeks to be a faithful biblical community before its Lord within its African context. This framing for the inquiry actually allows for all the issues raised by the agenda of African Theology to date. But it suggests a good many others as well, others not addressed in the dominant agenda, some of considerable consequence. To the extent that African Theology has

formulated its fundamental task on other terms, it has functioned from an inadequate axis.

That was <u>error one</u>, misconstruing its foundational task, by letting the context set the agenda. In the nature of the case, that meant (as I am about the elaborate) taking the problem of African Christian identity within modern Africa as *the controlling theological question*, rather than placing that important question of identity within a larger and more foundational theological task. And <u>error two</u> was then to answer only half of the question on African Christian identity. If the central theological question was taken to be: what does it mean to be a Christian African, then the issue of Christianity's correlation with its traditional African context was correctly taken as essential (as both Mbiti and Bediako have taken it to be). But this ought to have been recognized as only half of the essential theological question of African Christian identity, and not the primal half. So what was the second even more foundational half, the missed half, the ignored half?

3. The co-opted agenda

As Byang Kato and others have argued, the first, the primal half of the question for African Christian identity would need to be the effective correlation of African Christianity with its *Christian* heritage. It is right and good to ask, as African Theology has insistently done, how may African Christianity become ever more authentically African. But in the nature of the case it should first and even more insistently have been asking how may African Christianity be and become ever more authentically *Christian*. Yet throughout the literature this half of the question has only rarely surfaced, and mostly only because evangelical Africans have been insistent on it.

Without the pursuit of *both* aspects of the question of African Christian identity, the realities of human nature anywhere suggest, as do also the evidences of Christian history, that theological reflection can arrive all too readily at what one might term an *over-realized contextualization*, where the essential identity, purpose, and value of African Christianity *for* Africa—and for God's good will in Africa—have been lost. One can too easily end up with a Christianity whose *African* identity has been stoutly asserted, but whose *Christian* authenticity is left ill-defined, assumed, and negotiable. And that is what has largely happened within the discussion we call African Theology.

It happened because the African Theology project evolved itself not as an expression first and foremost of biblical commitments, but as a contributive sub-set of modern Africa's intellectual quest. And in doing so it therefore did

not set itself to critically engage those intellectual trends of the continent, but rather was willingly co-opted by them, subordinated to their agenda.

This is certainly nothing new in the history of Christianity. Down through history there have been many who worked out their Christian agenda as a subordinate project of their culture's agenda. The theological mindset that has been largely dominant in western Christianity for several centuries is precisely that, an intentional accommodation of Christian faith to the strictures and requirements of the ruling mindset of European enlightenment modernity in the western world. It was then unavoidable that that mindset became and continues to be hostile to evangelical Christianity, given evangelical Christianity's inherent commitments. And as biblically-grounded evangelical believers, what our commitments call us to, whether in Europe or Asia or Africa or wherever, is neither to ignore our intellectual setting, nor to accommodate to it, but intentionally to understand and engage it for the sake of the gospel. This is what a Lesslie Newbigin, a John Stott or a Ravi Zacharias has attempted to do for succeeding generations elsewhere in the evangelical world. It is what we are called to do in our generation here in our continent, if we are effectively to embrace our Christian intellectual responsibilities on this continent.

GOING BEYOND 'AFRICAN THEOLOGY'

In a separate lecture in this series I have elaborated the theme that, while honouring Byang Kato and building on his commitments and vision, we must also now go beyond Kato. I want to suggest here that it is now time as well to go beyond the African Theology movement of the last century, and even beyond some of its best recent practitioners. To clarify what I mean, let me for convenience use Kwame Bediako as an example of what I am saying, since he has been our near neighbour both geographically and in theological orientation, and his writings may be more familiar to us than most other examples. Speaking of going not only beyond Kato but also now beyond Bediako may therefore prove more helpfully clarifying.

Kwame Bediako has commonly been regarded, with good reason, as one of African Christianity's most articulate, creative, productive theologians. Following in the path of Mbiti, he has represented in many respects the best that the African Theology project has had to offer. We have much to learn from him. Yet, like Mbiti, he has explicitly framed his approach within structures familiar from the larger African Theology quest. And in consequence his contributions cannot entirely elude the inner limitations and deficiencies of that movement. To the extent that Bediako's way of framing

the core questions of the Christian intellectual project in Africa are, as with the African Theology movement, directly embedded in African intellectual modernity, in certain substantive respects his approach and his characteristic emphases are therefore, as with African intellectual modernity, no longer enough. Even as we continue to learn from him, might we now need in some important respects also to begin working our way forward beyond some of the limitations implicit in his brilliant achievements?

Let me mention for your consideration in this respect at least five areas in which we may find that we want to adjust our orientations, if African evangelical theological reflection is to begin moving on now not only beyond Kato but also beyond Bediako.

• *Refocus on Africa's modern 21ˢᵗ Century context.* As with the African Theology movement as a whole, the inner structures of Bediako's theological project can at times seem excessively delimited by their focus on traditional Africa, on building bridges between African Christianity and Africa's cultural heritage. We do need such bridges, and there are valuable insights to be gained from such constructions. But they are also assuredly not enough. Defining the theological task in this way is too constrictive. Modern Africa is more than traditional Africa, and living as a believing community in modern Africa requires a larger, more encompassing theological agenda. Bediako's project can at times seem more suited to equipping us theologically for life in 19ᵗʰ Century Africa than for life in 21ˢᵗ Century Africa.

• *Refocus on Africa's intellectual context.* Neither Bediako nor the African evangelical community has demonstrated extended critical engagement with a central element of our African context, namely modern Africa's dominant intellectual life. African evangelicalism has largely ignored this aspect of its context, while African theologians like Bediako have too often seemed in largely uncritical collaboration. It is time to go beyond these limitations. We should not allow ourselves to be co-opted into the agenda of our intellectual context. At the same time we need to embrace within our own essential agenda a biblically-grounded, realistic, critical awareness of and engagement with this powerful component of our context.

• *Refocus on Africa's global context.* So much exposition in African Theology, and not least in Bediako, seems confined to a strictly *bilateral* understanding of Africa's context, assessing contextual issues

insistently in terms of differences between Africa on the one hand and the West on the other. This bilateral approach is insufficient on two counts.

First, modern Africa's own *internal* context is more complicated than such assessment allows for. Africa is itself now pervasively westernised. The African Theology project is a westernised discourse. In an important sense its practitioners are themselves westernised, including Bediako. Hence such strictly dichotomised modes of contextual analysis are inadequate. It is time for them to be superseded by a more nuanced, realistic understanding of modern Africa's multiplex internal context.

Secondly, and as consequentially, there is more to Africa's *external* context than just the west. Andrew Walls has rightly challenged African Christianity, as it increasingly becomes a major centre of world Christianity, to shift its analytical self-understanding to its place in that more encompassing context. That worthy African Christian scholar Lamin Sanneh recently wrote a book with the significant title: *Post-Western Christianity.* We need now to go beyond any fixation with asserting African Christian identity over against Western Christianity, and begin more frequently to focus on our identity and calling within a now global Christianity, a global Christianity which is now *post-western*. In our theological assessments, we must now move beyond the limitations of a merely *bi*lateral focus, and instead begin to think *multi*laterally.

• *Refocus on <u>balanced</u> critical engagement.* Too often the impression has been allowed in African Theology that western influence in Africa mostly merits only critique and rejection, whereas the influence of Africa's traditional heritage mostly merits only affirmation. In our theological endeavours we now need to move beyond those imbalances that characterised intellectual passions in the past century, towards a more realistic and even-handed engagement in our 21st Century world. The difficult challenges affecting Africa's future demand no less. Grounded in biblical commitments, our theology should now manifest a capacity for both affirmation and critique toward all aspects of our modern African context, including both its western and its traditional components.

• *Refocus on authentic <u>Christian</u> identity.* Mbiti, Bediako, and Kato have all affirmed the urgent need for a Christianity on our continent that

is authentically *African*. But it is time to move beyond all perspectives that fail to ground this emphasis in a prior commitment to attaining and enhancing authentic *Christian* identity for the believing community in Africa. It is not enough merely to assume such identity, as African Theology has been inclined to do.

This would also entail moving forward in finding—as African Theology has not—the appropriate theological framing that will enable the believing community in Africa more effectively to affirm, identify with, and embrace its God-given Christian heritage and its extended Christian family *wherever* they may be found in the world and in Christian history.

AFRICAN CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

1. A Theological Key

Granted that we should not be governed by the African intellectual agenda, how should we nevertheless address the question at the heart of that agenda, and the one posed at the heart of African Theology, if we are among those committed to biblical Christianity on the continent? The challenge for the thoughtful Christian in Africa, to my mind, is not to ignore nor to renounce the intellectual passions of the continent, nor to be co-opted by them, as the African Theology movement has largely done. The challenge is rather, I suggest, to engage these powerful intellectual dynamics. What would it mean for us to engage the intellectual life of Africa on the question of African Christian identity?

Seeking to answer that question at its core, I think it would need to be done through articulating by voice, and demonstrating by life, the possibility, in Christ, of a fruitful inner integration between Christian allegiance and African identity. If we were to demonstrate the possibilities of an African Christian identity that is focused in positive terms, that is prepared for *inter*-dependence rather than merely *in*dependence, and for participation rather than mere resistance and opposition, we would be showing a way forward out of the intellectual dilemmas, limitations and failures that presently afflict the continent and its intellectual life.

Amidst the conflicting tides of our context, the double-tides pulling towards traditional Africa and simultaneously pulling towards unacknowledged westernisation, the challenge to biblically-committed African Christianity is not to become captive to either. Rather the challenge is for us to

show a viable alternative to both, to demonstrate a different way, a third way. We stand amidst a double-tide, voices and feet. Amidst that double-tide we must get our own feet down on solid rock, and get our heads above water—thereby gaining both a firm footing and also a clear view, that can enable thoughtful, balanced, critical evaluation in all directions, recognising both the good and the bad in the conflicting currents. Until we gain this grounded and clear-sighted posture, we are likely ourselves also to be but dependent elements of the prevailing currents.

And as we begin to nurture our distinct African Christian identity in this way, as some among us have already so well and nobly done, including Byang Kato, we will find the effective framework into which we may incorporate an appropriate, healthy, delimited, responsible sense of ethnic or national or continental identity, structured now within, and subordinate to, our overriding commitment to our Lord—a sense of identity therefore that can be constructive, participatory, fruitful, and liberating, rather than antagonistic, divisive and debilitating.

I wish to suggest that it is precisely in our theological commitments that we are offered the key for such an attainment. For surely the God we serve, this God who created all things, this God of the endless rich variety of this world, just this God chose within His good purposes to make us African or Asian or European. This God of variety who has built such rich complementarity into His creation, surely this God intended, willed, the emergence of African Christianity in the way it has so amazingly emerged in this past century. It has not happened by mistake, nor merely by natural social causation. Surely this God therefore intends through the church *in* Africa to contribute something *for* Africa—and also thereby to contribute something *from* Africa to the larger global community, things perhaps not otherwise available. That is indeed how He works, it is how He has routinely generated and guided things, for mutuality and for complementarity.

The effective key to a balanced African Christian identity for the new era is to be found, I suggest, in Paul's analogy of the Christian community as a body, with its many parts, each distinct, each necessary, each contributing, each needing the other, all working together. Here I suggest is the appropriate model for comprehending a balanced and integrated and affirming sense of Christian identity in Africa today. If we need others overseas to be what God has called them to be, they also need us to be what God has called us to be. That is to say, only by being appropriately *African* can committed African Christians bring their particular contribution to the larger body of Christ. It is

the God-granted privilege, and duty, for African Christianity today to search out and embody winsomely, before a watching and needy continent, and world, this meaning of being a Christian African, authentically Christian and authentically African. And hence the legitimacy of Byang Kato's ringing challenge: "Let African Christians be Christian *Africans*!"

2. Complementarity

Let me explore the practical implications of this perspective on biblical complementarity a little further. If we as African Christians simply merge into a new homogenised world order, losing any distinctive identity, we cannot bring to the table the particular richness that God intended by making us African. And if we merely insist on our independent distinctness, effectively saying "we have no need of you", we also fail to participate in God's larger purposes, serving the body of Christ elsewhere and being served by them.

Let us prepare ourselves to join the feast, the festivities, not sitting off by ourselves, ever asserting the quality of our distinctive foods. Nor should we join the grand feast empty handed, bringing nothing. Let us equip ourselves to bring our share, our African contribution, knowing how to cook it to be tasty and nourishing to believers anywhere. And let us be ready as well to benefit from the dishes that others have likewise prepared and are graciously sharing. How very African, and how very Christian, this approach would be, this vision of complementarity.

Somehow as educated African believers we are meant to find an inner integration between our Christian allegiance and our African setting, which will permit us to affirm God's ways, and our own place within those ways. The solution cannot be merely in making Christianity more African, nor can it be resolved by choosing Christ over against African identity. It is rather a duty of an African Christian to search out and embody the meaning of being truly Christian and truly African, under the Lordship of Christ.

If I am only partly right, then there lies before us a remarkable calling and opportunity for African evangelical Christianity in our day, an opportunity to take the lead, to take the initiative, to show the way forwards towards health and light and God's blessing for Africa and through Africa. To accomplish this we are called to get our feet down on rock, and our head above the prevailing tides—so that we are not swept to and fro by every wind; so that we may become adult in mind, so that we may be in bondage to no ideology but Christ's—and by His power then winsomely engage every alternative ideology

of our contexts. That is our Christian intellectual responsibility in modern Africa.

CONCLUSION

What then shall we say in conclusion? If African Christianity is to flourish for God's good purpose in and for Africa, rather than merely serving as a collaborative element of the dominant intellectual trends of its secular context, then it must both remain profoundly alive to its biblical foundations, and at the same time sensitively attentive to the dynamic realities of its present context. And that requires not least that it should be attuned to and engaged with its *intellectual* context. That is to say, it must learn to address not only its evangelistic and social responsibilities, but also to embrace its intellectual and theological responsibilities within modern Africa. It must develop a life of the mind that is theologically vibrant, biblically sound, and sensitively suited to the contextual realities of modern Africa, including the modern African intellectual context. That is precisely what Kato was calling for. That was his urgent challenge to African evangelicalism in his day, still applicable more than three decades later. Only by achieving a mature theological dimension in its life, suited to the modern African context, engaged with modern African intellectual realities, will the church in Africa be able to meet the urgent needs thrust upon it by its rapid growth, and the remarkable opportunities opened up for it by that growth. May God grant us the grace to embrace this calling.