

ISSUES IN THE THEOLOGICAL TASK IN AFRICA TODAY

By Tite Tienou

For too long evangelicals have been content to work at the grass-roots level. This in itself is highly commendable. But dwelling on this exclusively is as dangerous as any extremism. Perhaps we evangelicals now suffer from the exclusive concern of our fathers for minimal theological training. Perhaps it is too late to redeem the time we have lost talking about all the evils of theology. It is hard to say. Be that as it may, one of the immediate consequences of the lack of evangelical presence on the scene of academic theology is the feeling of being trapped. It seems that the agenda for theological discussion is already set for us and all we do is react against the ideas contained in this agenda. This need not be so. There are many key issues currently under discussion in Africa, and I propose to consider a few of them.

Christianity and African culture

Culture has increasingly come to the forefront in recent theological debate. The Conference on Salvation Today held at Bangkok in 1973, the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974, and the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Nairobi in 1975, all spoke about culture. These three conferences revealed to the general Christian public what specialists had debated for years: how do we, as Christians, deal with the diversity of cultures in the world? But what do we mean by culture? This is one word we need to define as carefully as possible if we are to prevent misunderstanding. Anthropologists and ethnologists hardly agree on how culture should be defined. Therefore, how shall we theologians make ourselves understood when we use the term culture? Professor John Mbiti,

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in his PACLA lecture on 'Christianity and African Culture', proposed the following definition:

culture...(is the) human pattern of life in response to man's environment. This pattern is expressed in physical forms (such as agriculture, the arts, technology, etc...) and in form of reflection on the total reality of life (such as language, philosophy, religion, spiritual values, world view, the riddle of life -- birth -- death, etc...). 1

The Consultation on the Gospel and Culture held in Bermuda in January, 1978, after recognizing that culture 'is not easily susceptible of definition', had this to say:

Culture is an integrated system of beliefs (about God or reality or ultimate meaning), of values (about what is true, good, beautiful and normative), of customs (how to behave, relate to others, talk, pray, dress, work, play, trade, farm, eat, etc...), and of institutions which express these beliefs, values and customs (government, law courts, temples or churches, family schools, hospitals factories, shops, clubs, etc...), which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity. 2

If I quote these two definitions in *extenso*, it is for the purpose of showing the complexity of our topic. But, whatever our definition of culture is, we can take into account the fact of its integrative function and the impossibility of separating culture from philosophy, religion and spiritual values. The importance of this for the development of theology should be evident. Our attitude towards culture conditions, to a large extent, our theological methodology. An illustration at hand in the history of Christian thought is the way Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria conceived the relationship between Christian theology and philosophy. Tertullian's sharp disjunction between theology and philosophy is well known, while Clement's position, seeking to accommodate theology to philosophy, is a recurring one in the history of Christian thought.

Tertullian, a lawyer from North Africa, wrote this in his *Prescription Against Heretics*:

heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy ... What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? Our instruction comes from the porch (stoa) of Solomon, who himself taught that 'the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart'. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief... 3

Clement of Alexandria, on the other hand, had this to say in his *Stromata*:

philosophy is in a sense a work of Divine Providence.... before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration... philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, till the Lord should call the Greeks.... (It) was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ.... The Greek preparatory culture, therefore with philosophy itself, is shown to have come down from God to men...⁴

You could not find, if you tried, more opposing views! I wonder on whose side we are: Tertullian's? Clement's? I think that the majority of evangelicals in Africa would, at least in theory, agree with Tertullian. And yet, privately, African Christians feel the tremendous burden of having to bear at least two cultural loads: the western and the traditional. That is precisely where in the words of William B. Yeats; and Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. We have learned to think of our customs as pagan but there have rarely been, if ever, substitutes for those cultural elements. The consequences of this are horrifying: much of practical evangelical Christianity in Africa is terribly syncretistic, while missionaries, and the pastors they have trained, keep on preaching the 'pure biblical message'! This is an important pastoral problem in our continent today. Several evangelical authors have warned of the dangers of syncretism, and with good reason, but syncretism has many facets. There is unwitting syncretism (produced by inadequate teaching of Christian truth), there is practical syncretism (where the person will go to the fetish priest, often in secret, or possess a talisman, while at the same time profess to be an 'orthodox' Christian), and theological syncretism. It is the second form of syncretism which is practised by many Christians because they have not been given clear Scriptural teaching which has grappled with the realities of every day living. Missionaries and pastors need to have a right attitude towards culture and a sympathetic understanding of it if they are to help Christians out of this devastating syncretistic way of living.

But how will missionaries and pastors develop this right attitude towards African culture? We must start in our ministerial training institutions and our theological seminaries to make our students aware of the cultural conditioning of all theologies. Too many of us think that we preach a de-culturalized Gospel, but there is no such thing! Rather we must not underestimate the fact that Christianity, as we know it, has worn the cultural garb of the Western world for nearly twenty centuries because 'the cultural dissimilarity which divided the Roman Empire.... (divided) the Christian Church also.'⁵ Evangelicalism as well as Roman Catholicism are thus culturally western.

Obviously, Christianity and evangelicalism do not stand or fall with western culture. As God's Church is composed of a mosaic of peoples, so Christianity can wear a multi-coloured cultural garb. We must, therefore study our own culture, the cultures of the biblical world and western culture.

To be a good theologian in African one must be well read in cultural anthropology. We need to examine African culture very closely to see what elements are compatible or incompatible with the Gospel message. We evangelicals need not be afraid of the fact that we are moving towards culturally differentiated Christianities.⁶ This trend is nothing new in the history of Christianity and it is no more dangerous today than it was in ages past. It will not necessarily lead to syncretism if the essential doctrines of the Bible are kept. That is why we must resist the temptation of making absolutes out of our own interpretations of Scripture.⁷ We must trust God's Spirit to guide the African Church into the truth, provided she abides in God's Word.

I realize there is much more that could be said on the subject of culture. Therefore some may feel that this is barely scratching the surface; for this I apologize. However, I did not intend to give answers but I wanted to call attention to the importance of the subject and to show how, regardless of what we say, our theological reflection is conditioned by culture. It is now, or never, that African evangelicals must start reflecting on such issues in order to give answers. Because the Christian faith is lived daily in culture, we need to develop a theology of culture. Professor Mbiti feels that this, among other things, is lacking in Africa.⁸ If we evangelicals develop a theology of culture, we could win back some precious theological ground we have lost, and we could also help the churches to come out of their cultural ghettos and confront culture with the Gospel, at all levels.

Christianity and African Religion

I have noted that it is virtually impossible to separate culture from philosophy, religion, and spiritual values. If it were not for modern secularism, we would not think that such a separation is possible for, as Paul Tillich put it, "Religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion."⁹ Our attitude to culture will therefore, determine our attitude to religion. There will be those who take Tertullian's side, advocating a radical discontinuity between Christianity and other religions (African religions included). There will be those who will agree with Clement of Alexandria, recognizing some continuity between Christianity and other religions. These seem to be the two positions adopted by Christian theologians, from Tertullian and Clement to Barth and Brunner. It is, therefore, not surprising to find those two trends among African theologians (at least those who have written); those with an anglo-saxon education seem to insist on a continuity between African religion and Christianity, while those with a continental European education (predominantly Barthian?) see a radical discontinuity first, and then attempt to bring Christian thought and life into African society. ¹⁰

Karl Barth, in his dialectical methodology, affirmed a process of discontinuity between Biblical Revelation and all religions. His angry "Nein" to

Emil Brunner in the debate on a possible point of contact is a testimony of his determination. But, by abolishing religion, biblical revelation includes it. It is in this light that we must understand Hendrik Kraemer's conclusions. He insisted on discontinuity, he rejected the idea of a point of contact, but he added that there were points of contact.¹¹ In a way, this is exactly Mbiti's reasoning in his paper on *Christianity and African Religion*. He argued for a process of continuity and discontinuity, and that African religion is a preparation for the Gospel. He writes:

It is African Religion which generated a spirituality that finds ultimate fulfillment in the Gospel.... The Christian Faith comes, therefore, to enrich, to fulfill, to crown and to say 'yes' to African Religion and not to destroy it. The Gospel of Jesus – Christ both judges and saves or sanctifies many elements in African Religion. But, however rich African religiosity has been, it could not and did not produce that which the Gospel now offers to African peoples. Yet, it tutored the African in religious life, so that they could find in the Gospel that to which this religiosity pointed within the framework of its own revelation of God.¹²

He then goes on to give what elements can be used by the Church in a process of accommodation. Some beliefs, practises, traditional prayers, sacred places, morals and values and the services of (former) traditional religious leaders can be used for the enrichment of Christian life (pp. 5, 6).

To be sure there are good elements in African traditional religion. Not everything is the work of the devil. We must all recognize this fact and give credit to Mbiti. But what he says is more than just recognition of good elements. He makes definite theological statements. What must the evangelical think? What does the Bible say? Fortunately, Scripture does address itself to the question of multiplicity of religions in the world, both in the Old Testament and in the New. The exegesis of passages such as Acts 14:15 ff., Acts 17, Romans 1 and 2 leads to the following observations:

1. Non-Christian religions show that all men seek God and have a certain knowledge of Him (Acts 17:26, 27; Romans 1:21).
2. The seeking of non-Christian religions is at the same time a deformation of the knowledge of God, for man likes to domesticate God (Romans 1:18, 23). This underlines the ambiguity of non-Christian religiosity: it seeks God but it suppresses knowledge of Him.
3. No non-Christian religion gives a true knowledge of God, for without the light of Christ all men are without God (*atheoi*) (Ephesians 2:12).

This is what the Reformers and their heirs understood God's Word to teach about religions outside biblical revelation. It is not popular today. It has never been. But we must hold this view if we believe in the uniqueness of Christ and the effect of sin in man's heart.¹³

But saying this is not denying that there is revelation outside biblical revelation. God's truth is one and He allowed men to seek Him in their own ways

(Acts 14:15 ff). It is only affirming that there is no other Name but Christ. There are scholars who, understanding revelation as encounters with God, would affirm that revelation outside the Scriptures is just as valid. 14 Let us note first of all that revelation as encounters with God is not a discovery of the twentieth century. Read the Pentateuch and you will see how many encounters the patriarchs had. The whole Bible has examples of such encounters. Let us also note that they did not oppose the subjective knowledge of those encounters with the objective knowledge of propositional revelation such as: 'Listen, Israel, the Lord your God is the only God' (Deuteronomy 6:4) or 'You will be holy for I am holy' (Leviticus 20:7). Theophanies, sign and miracles certainly serve as revelation. They are often spectacular in character and this is why many people seek after them, particularly in the African 'Independent' churches. There is a danger here. Often these revelations are not clear and need interpretation and this opens the door to all sorts of abuse. The objective, written revelation is the method *par excellence* for communication with human beings and for teaching truths to man. But although the written Word is clearer and more sure than the subjective revelation, it is also open to the same dangers of mistaken interpretation. Evangelicals in Africa must maintain these two aspects of revelation, especially in the debate on African theology.

African Theology The expression 'African Theology' is an ambiguous one. Much of what is currently being called by that name is but ethno-theology. It is as if there is an attempt to write the theology of the encounters which African peoples had with God. If this is what we mean, let us say so! But misunderstanding develops because most people who hear the word 'theology' think of *Christian* theology. This is quite understandable, even though Christianity has no exclusive right to the word 'theology'. We may speak of Muslim theology, of Hindu theology, of Buddhist theology; these may or may not be ethnic in nature. It is quite another thing when we speak of African theology: the ethnic nature is definitely what one has in mind. Nevertheless some of African theology is interested in accommodating Christianity to African religion. John Mbiti considers that African theology should not only deal with the classical themes of theology but it should address itself to others such as: dialogue between Christianity and African religion, Christianity and Islam, Christianity and African culture, Church and State, pastoral problems, liturgical renewal, and the penetration of Christian faith in an African context.¹⁵

African theology is not understood by all proponents in the same way. It is legitimate to start with a phenomenological investigation of African myths, beliefs and religious practices. But if this is the only purpose of African theology then, of course, it cannot be accepted by evangelicals. Because of possible misunderstanding, Dr. Kato thought it more appropriate to talk of Christian Theology and then define whatever context we find it related to.... But there should be a continuing effort to relate Christian Theology to the

changing situations in Africa.¹⁶ This would seem to indicate that an *evangelical* 'African theology' is a contextual theology.

Contextualization When we come to contextualization, we find that the same ambiguity persists. What is contextualization? This term can also mean different things to different people. Tokunboh Adeyemo thinks that Rene Padilla describes it as a dynamic-equivalence theology. He continues that the end product of such a theology is not desirable because 'the message becomes relativistic, existential and situational'.¹⁷ He himself proposes 'Biblical Theology in an African setting'. One may ask: 'How is that different from contextualization?' The answer must be: 'Very little, if at all.

Regardless of what word we use, the problem is with us: Africa is not Europe, Europe is not America, America is not Asia! Even in those continents there are various settings or 'contexts'. This simple fact leads us to the question of how to make the Christian message take hold in different situations. This is quite legitimate. People are different even though there are some basic similarities among them. One cannot, therefore, take a 'Biblical Theology' and apply it anywhere! A contextual approach, whether or not we like the word, is needed and in fact has always been applied (with more or less awareness and forcefulness) in Christian theology. The question is: how do we prevent contextualization from leading to heresy? A right contextual approach takes seriously both the biblical text and the cultural context where the message is given.

In the words of the *Willowbank Report*:

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 responsibility to others. These concerns will influence the questions which are put to the Scriptures.... As we address Scripture, Scripture addresses us. We find that our culturally conditioned presuppositions are being challenged and our questions corrected¹⁸.

All the discussion about Christianity and African culture, Christianity and African religion, African theology, and contextualization spring from attempts to make Christianity more relevant to the African situation. This is what we evangelicals want. These must be among the issues in our own theological reflection. We want Christianity to be in the hearts, minds and deeds of our church members. We must not spare any effort to reach that goal! Let us not dismiss the African context too easily. But let us, also, never doubt God's Word for, to whom then shall we go? His Word is Truth; true Truth, as Francis Schaeffer would say! He alone has the Word of eternal life!

1. Mbiti, John S. "Christianity and African Culture," Lecture given at the Pan-African Christian Leadership Assembly, Nairobi, 9–21 December 1976, p. 1
2. *The Willowbank Report*, a Consultation on Gospel and Culture 6–13 January, 1978, Bermuda, p. 4
3. Tertullian "The Prescription Against Heretics" in Robert L. Ferm's *Readings in the History of Christian Thought* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964) p. 5
4. Clement of Alexandria "The Stromata" in *Readings in the History of Christian Thought*, p. 12.
5. Ramm, Bernard L. *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco, TX: Word Books 1973).
6. Chenu, Bruno "Point de vue d'un theologian europeen" *Lumiere et Vie*, t. XXIII novembre-decembre 1974, No. 120, p. 81
7. I do not want to minimise the importance of hermeneutics in theology. The right hermeneutic is that which makes us understand what the original hearers or readers of the message understood. Hermeneutics is not easy. Perhaps we should pay less attention to schools of interpretation and more attention to the way Jesus and the New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament.
8. Mbiti, John S. *Christianity and African Culture*, p. 16
9. Cited by F. Chapey in the introduction to *Courage d'etre* (2^e ed., Casterman, 1967) p. 10
10. Olson, Jeanine *Histoire de l'Eglise* (Yaounde: Editions Cle, 1972) p. 160
11. Kraemer, Hendrik *La foi Chretienne et less religions non Chretiennes* (Neuchatel, Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, 1956) pp. 159, 162-163
13. Blocher, Henry *Prolegomenes*, pp. 32–33; Jean Calvin *Institution de la Religion Chretienne*, 1/4, 1, 5, 12, 13, 14, pp. 12, 29–31; Leon Morris *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976) p. 157
14. Morris, Leon *op. cit*, p. 148 Cf. Ronald H. Nash's article "Truth by Any Other Name" *Christianity Today*, October 7, 1977, pp. 17–23.
15. Mbiti, John S. 'Point de vue d'un theologien Africain' *Lumiere et Vie*, t. XXIII, November – December, 1974, no. 120, p. 90.
16. Kato, Byang H. "Black Theology and African Theology" in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 1/1977, p. 47.
17. Adeyemo, Tokunboh *Contemporary Issues and the Future of Evangelicals in Africa*, p. 4.
18. *The Willowbank Report*, p. 7