

# THE THEOLOGICAL TASK OF THE CHURCH IN AFRICA: WHERE ARE WE NOW AND WHERE SHOULD WE BE GOING?\*

*Tite Tienou*

## *Introduction*

My own introduction to the importance of theology in Africa dates back to the second general assembly of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) in January 1973 at Limuru in Kenya. It was there that Byang Kato became the first African evangelical leader to call attention to theological endeavours in our part of the world. The challenge he gave marked a turning point in evangelical theological development in Africa. Evangelical African leadership came to realise that African theology was being developed without them. As I recall, Kato did not have to do any convincing. The leaders knew that the lack of theology was one of the chief problems of African Christianity. As a result the 1973 AEAM General Assembly became an avowal of a certain theological malaise among evangelicals, the recognition of a problem, and a cry for help.

In the Byang Kato Memorial Lectures which I was invited to deliver in 1978 at ECWA Theological Seminary in Igbaja, Nigeria, I spoke on "The Theological Task of the Church in Africa" (subsequently published under that title by Africa Christian Press in 1982, as the first number in its "Theological Perspectives in Africa" series). I attempted to map out an evangelical theological strategy in Africa. I asked then, "How shall we African evangelicals fulfill our theological responsibilities in Africa?" The title of this present paper implies that the matter is not yet settled. I will first survey the current status of evangelical theological activity in Africa, then review what we have achieved since my earlier lectures, and finally suggest some appropriate directions for the future.

## **I. Where are we now?**

More than fourteen years have now passed since the 1973 AEAM General Assembly. What has been accomplished since Byang Kato addressed his

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challenge to African evangelical leadership? The Principal evangelical theological initiatives in Africa since 1973 have been the founding of the AEAM Theological Commission, the launching of two graduate schools of theology, and the establishment of the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa, with its numerous supplementary services. These have been difficult and worthy achievements. But honesty requires us to confess that, beyond the encouraging facade of each of these institutions, chaos and disintegration have been, and still are, ever present threats. There have been some very rough spots. Indeed, while all of these initiatives have made laudatory contributions, some perhaps more so than others, not one has yet become effectively settled, not one is yet securely in orbit. And there is still so much else needing to be done. Assuredly as we survey the scene today, we are forced to acknowledge that evangelicals have a long way yet to go in achieving Kato's vision for evangelical theological responsibility and maturity in Africa. To the question why this is so there are many possible answers.

Dr Bong Ro, executive secretary of the Asia Theological Association, delights in saying every time I meet him: "Theology is created in Germany, corrected in America, and corrupted in Asia." When we think of theologians, most of us do not automatically think of people of non-European stock. Theology as we experience it in Africa is basically of European origin. It may at best have been recooked in Africa, or maybe only rewarmed. This problematic state of affairs has not changed much over the years. The Kenyan theologian John Mbiti has stated: "The Christians in Africa have a faith but not a theology."<sup>1</sup> What Mbiti says of Christians generally in Africa is especially true of evangelical Christians in Africa, even today. Let me single out several of the factors contributing to the continuing evangelical theological malaise in Africa.

#### **A. Causes of theological malaise**

1. Proclamation without reflection. The evangelical dilemma in Africa can best be described as proclamation without reflection. Evangelicals generally perceive themselves as proclaimers of the Word. In that sense they are concerned with making the Gospel kerygmatically universal. Since evangelicals concentrate on proclamation and contribute significantly to the growth of African Christianity, Mbiti's statement should be a stimulus to them to examine their relationship to theology in Africa. In their emphasis on gospel proclamation, they tend to neglect reflection and theological responsibilities. Sometimes reflection is even perceived as an adversary of gospel proclamation. The irony is that such a perception is, in itself, a theological decision. In a paradoxical way, evangelicals in Africa (and doubtless elsewhere) have a theology of no theology!

2. Fragmentation. A second cause of the continuing evangelical theological malaise in Africa is fragmentation. I refer to the denominational and doctrinal fragmentation in Africa which prevents evangelicals from really working together on a common theological agenda. Suspicion of ecumenical liberalism, outside influences, and inherent African realities all contribute to the persisting fragmentation of evangelicals in Africa. The result is that many groups try to do

alone certain things which could best be done cooperatively. Even when cooperation is agreed, each group wants to participate on its own terms.

One could mention such additional factors as the continuing shortage of trained evangelical theologians, unconstructive instincts for power and control, and assignment patterns which leave little time for the labour of reflection, as also contributing to the current evangelical theological malaise. The consequences of this continuing failure among African evangelicals to fulfill their theological responsibilities on the continent are severe.

#### B. Consequences of theological malaise

1. Silence by default. The first and most notable effect of the evangelical failure is that African theology is being made without us. Observers attribute the origin of the debate on African theology to a 1956 article by Paul Fueter entitled "Theological Education in Africa."<sup>2</sup> In the same year a group of black French-speaking priests published their *Des Prêtres Noirs S'interrogent et Suggèrent*<sup>3</sup> which also raised the issues of African theology. Was there any similar evangelical event dating back to 1956?

The situation is made painfully evident today by the lack of evangelical presence in recent publications on African theology. In 1984 Orbis Books published *Theology in Africa* by Kwesi Dickson, and in 1985 *The Origins and Development of African Theology* by G H Muzorewa. The year 1984 also saw the release of *African Theologies: A Profile*, by Justin S Ukpong (Gaba Publications). These are substantial monographs. The most noteworthy evangelical contribution during these years was the publication of *Biblical Christianity in Africa* by Byang Kato (ACP 1985). But even this is a reprint of previously published papers. Mention must also be made of Osad Imasogie's *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (ACP 1983).

Perhaps the brightest spot has been the emergence of the EAST AFRICA JOURNAL OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY, sponsored by Scott Theological College of Kenya, now in its sixth year of publication, which has given some visibility to African evangelical theological discussion. One nevertheless wonders how many African evangelical leaders are reading this journal regularly. Articles and other short essays by evangelical African authors have also been published elsewhere; mention may be made for example of "The Church in Theological Ferment in Africa" by Imasogie.<sup>4</sup> However, the lack of substantial African evangelical theological presence in scholarly publications means that in the arena of public debate in African Christianity the evangelical voice is not being heard. Evangelical contributions in the past decade have been minimal and mostly peripheral. Generally speaking evangelical theologians continue only to react to an agenda set by others, because they still have not begun to participate effectively and constructively in the larger theological debate in Africa. This is serious because ideas have a way of shaping history.

2. Spiritual immaturity. A second and more serious effect of evangelical theological failure in Africa is the impact this has on evangelism, church growth

and spiritual maturity. An observer puts it this way: "Africa has the fastest growing church in the world; it may also have the fastest declining church!" Numerical growth far outpaces spiritual depth and maturity in African Christianity. In time, a decline in numerical growth will be seen, and indeed may already be observable.

## II. Where should we be going?

When we read of theological development in Africa, we often hear the expression "African theology". Let me plant a doubt in your mind by asking, should it be "African theology", or should it be "African theologies"? Is such theology singular or plural? All of us who are familiar with African theology know that in reality it is plural. Africa is a diverse continent. It is therefore more realistic to speak of African theologies in the plural. And if this is the case, what are the contours of such theologies?

Justin Ukpong renders us a service when he specifies three general types of African theology: African inculturation theology (or contextualisation), black theology, and liberation theology. Why is it a service to have suggested this typology? Because each of these three aspects of theology addresses a major problem of contemporary Africa. The first problem is cultural identity, which is addressed by inculturation theology. Black theology deals with the problem of colour. Liberation theology deals with the problem of poverty and injustice in Africa. These three, as everyone knows, are dominant problems in Africa.

But I must hasten to add that these three theologies do not deal with problems perceived by African Christians at the grassroots. What I am saying is that all three of these theologies are generated and sustained by academics. You can afford to devote your attention to African culture and Christianity and the problems of poverty when you are sure of an income from university teaching. Black theology is closer to the grassroots because you cannot deal with black theology in South Africa without having to risk your life. And of course the problem of cultural identity and the question of poverty are more than academic. But perhaps African theology needs to take its fundamental shape much more in terms of real Christians in their total context in the African continent.

### A. A fresh focus

In the current development of theology in Africa, there is in fact a gap between academic and popular theology. Academic theology is theology written for international readership. In this category would be the writings of Mbiti, Pobee, Tshibangu, Sawyerr and Fashole-Luke, to name only a few. I would have to say that Kato's writings, and my own, must also be included here. Not too many people in the local churches in Africa are reading such works. I am not offended when I find that the local pastor has not read my book. We assume too quickly that what exercises us also dominates the attention of all African Christians. Once when talking to a group of pastors in Ivory Coast I was asked, "Excuse me, but you just said 'contextualization'. Can you tell me what this means?" The

question came from a graduate of a theological college. I know that what I write is not for popular consumption. And I also know that it is popular theology that takes root in the heart of the people in Africa. It is popular theology that truly counts. This is theology expressed in hymns, in preaching, and in the ordinary counsel given by pastors and other spiritual leaders on a day-to-day basis.

On the evangelical scene, a lot is happening theologically in Africa at the popular level, while little is happening at the academic. This situation is alarming because popular theology is by no means always grounded in and governed by Scripture. The way in which some pastors preach and give counsel may be totally opposed to sound scriptural interpretation.

It may yet prove, however, to be providential that there is a gap between academic and popular theology within African Christianity. For the solution to that situation, I want to suggest, lies uniquely within the reach of African evangelicals. They are in fact strategically positioned to assume the theological initiative in Africa by implementing a third way in African theology, a way which neither remains in scholastic discussions nor disdains real life issues.

David Bosch states that good theology always arises out of emergency situations, that is, in the crucible of actual ministry.<sup>5</sup> So it was for the biblical writers—New Testament theology was not produced in ivory towers. I would think that evangelicals have an opportunity to make a fresh and determinative contribution in African theology, because who in Africa is more interested in applying biblical truths to emergency situations than the local evangelical pastor!

What we need to do is to provide such people with a proper approach to biblical interpretation in Africa. I do not mean just the academics. The simplest village evangelist needs to understand how to interpret the Bible rightly in context. He may not have read all the wonderful things about hermeneutics that are available. Someone will have to teach him in ways that he will understand and find useful. But if that happens, if thereby a proper interpretation of Scripture takes place at the grass roots, informed by a proper understanding of the culture, then such a pastor's preaching and counselling will be sound African theology of the best and most needed sort, whether he realizes it or not. The pastor would not call it theology, but he would be using good theology, true African theology. He would have the truth in his own context. He is the one who is ideally placed to merge academic theology and popular theology in Africa.

Of course at root it is not really a question of capturing the initiative in theology on the continent. To be on the cutting edge is not the crucial matter. Competition with this or that group is not the point. The whole issue is much more fundamental and much more comprehensive. Our basic motivation must be obedience to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. For the Great Commission cannot be considered fulfilled unless and until there is teaching and discipleship. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19,20). Here one unavoidably encounters the role of good theology. I agree with Imasogie that "mission is much more comprehensive than bringing people to an initial commitment of their lives to

Christ. The church must become the centre of theological instruction and discussion."<sup>6</sup>

### **B. A variety of approaches**

In fact, we must not only pursue a theology that is more adequately focused through the real-life needs at the local level of African Christianity, but we also need to pursue a more comprehensive strategy for evangelical theological responsibility in Africa. We need a broader perception of appropriate theological life and activity within the church. We need a strategy which seeks to facilitate such life at all levels of the church, through a variety of approaches.

I am alarmed, for example, at the over-emphasis on theological schools. We act as though the enhancement of theological education is the best and only way to promote theological development on the continent. I am not against theological schools or else I would not be teaching in one. But the theological school in Africa is only one part of the total system of theological life needed within the church. Because we are programme-oriented we tend to think we can develop a seminary and everything else will follow. But that is not true. We need, for example, to give as much attention to equipping pastors once they are out in the field as we give to equipping them before they enter the field.

Indeed, the kind of theology I have in mind is not best developed in seminaries. We need for example to pursue more vigorous programmes of publication, designed to touch base at all levels. Technology needs to be used to advantage. If a promising person is found who has sound biblical exposition, his messages should be recorded and transcribed for wider diffusion. Much more creativity is needed to develop the full infrastructures of responsible theological life in the church in Africa.

This is even true within theological education itself. Traditionally evangelicals gave greatest attention to the basic level of church leadership needs, the training of village pastors and evangelists. More recently, the base is being allowed to crumble as more and more attention has been focused on more advanced levels. Of course the highest levels of theological training need to be developed on the continent. But lower level Bible schools are not to be despised. Their existence means that there are resources available in Africa for grounding pastors in sound theological knowledge. As such they are vital for the evangelical theological agenda in Africa.

There must be no single approach. If the plurality of Africa is taken seriously, there must be a multiplicity of approaches for responsible theological activity on the continent. Two years ago I joined with some friends in a private discussion on theological developments in Africa. We came up with a list of varied approaches to theological development which should be encouraged within evangelical Christianity in Africa at the more academic level, if full-orbed responsible theological life is to emerge. Let me share the list, since it is very suggestive, even if it is only focused on the academic level. And of course in some cases these approaches are already being pursued.

1. **Theological monograph series.** Begin several different book series, providing

theological perspectives on vital issues facing Christianity in Africa, some at the scholarly level and others at a more popular level.

2. **Colloquiums.** Organize meetings which bring together influential African evangelical thinkers, for mutual fellowship and intellectual stimulation, to plan for and cooperate in effective theological development on the continent.

3. **Textbooks.** Meet the felt need among theological schools for more contextualized textbooks, in theology, church history, and especially in the applied areas of the curriculum, such as ethics, pastoral theology, counselling, and Christian education.

4. **Research centres.** Provide institutional bases for research programmes relating to theological development in Africa, and for facilitating cooperation among theological researchers.

5. **Professional newsletters.** Offering timely news, information, and stimulation for the various theological professions, such as for theological educators. This would include cross-pollination of ideas and innovations, and review of significant articles and research in the field.

6. **Theological journals.** More journals are needed on the order of the EAST AFRICA JOURNAL OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY, some at a higher level of technical scholarship and others at a more popular level.

7. **Departments of religion.** Evangelical influence in the universities, especially in their departments of religion, needs to be more deliberately pursued.

8. **Pastors' theological workshops.** Organize workshops to help pastors and church leaders better integrate theology with effective ministry in the African context.

9. **Professional societies.** Set up societies for the various theological professions and disciplines, such as a Society for Christian Educators in Africa, or an Evangelical Society for African Church History.

10. **Research grants.** Find grants for proven African scholars to do research, writing, and publication.

11. **Theological schools.** Assist theological schools in improving libraries, curriculum, administration, student recruitment, in-service staff training, continental and international contacts, and academic recognition through visiting consultants, professional workshops, publications, surveys, accreditation services, lectureships, and associations of schools.

12. **Theological students fellowships.** Promote the development of theological student fellowships in different regions.

13. **Short-term theological institutes and seminars.** Designed for laypersons or for professionals, to stimulate theological reflection on various specific problems and

challenges facing Christianity in Africa.

14. **Specialized academic programmes.** Certain academic and vocational specializations important to African evangelical development need to be set up through existing academic institutions in Africa, such as specializations in Islamics, TEE, and Christian education.

#### **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude with a summary and a challenge. I have called attention to the continuing theological malaise within African evangelical Christianity as well as some of the factors contributing to this state of affairs and some of its consequences, consequences which are profoundly detrimental both to church growth and to Christian maturity. I have also outlined some suggested directions for the future.

The situation is critical but not hopeless. It is still possible for evangelicals to move forward decisively towards theological responsibility and maturity. Evangelicals in Africa are best positioned to overcome the debilitating polarisation between academic and popular theology, and to demonstrate a new way forward for African Christian theology. To do so they must place more emphasis, not on academic theology, but on academic theology that is in touch with, responding to, and facilitating popular theology through a range of creative approaches, for the equipping and maturation of the church. If our academic theology results only in obtaining degrees and writing pompous books, then I for one want nothing to do with it. But if it encourages more missionary proclamation, more discipleship, more faithfulness to our Lord, then assuredly this is the kind of theology that makes sense for Africa.



**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>On 28 May 1985 over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

<sup>2</sup>*International Review of Missions* 45 (1956) 377.

<sup>3</sup>Paris: Les Editions du CERF, 1956.

<sup>4</sup>*Evangelical Review of Theology* 9 (1985) 359–71.

<sup>5</sup>"Missionary Theology in Africa" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 49 (1984) 15.

<sup>6</sup>*Evangelical Review of Theology* 9 (1985) 369.