

Byang Kato: A Theological Reappraisal

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The late Byang Kato is a Nigerian theologian who died at a young age about 30 years ago. In the past two or three decades, he has been praised by some and castigated by others. This paper attempts a reappraisal of his theology.

Often Kato is stereotyped as an extremist in terms of African theology. Prof. Kwame Bediako is one who devoted much attention to Kato in his writings. In 1983 he submitted a useful Ph.D. dissertation which compares the thought of a few early North African theologians with a few 20th century African theologians. This thesis was published in 1992 under the title of "Theology and Identity." There Bediako says:

Byang Henry Kato came to embody the very antithesis of the basic positions enunciated by the African theologians we have studied so far. Virtually everything he wrote was intended as a reaction to, and a rebuttal of, much that went to constitute the 'African theology' of the last two decades.¹

Bediako calls Kato the "dissenting voice in modern African theology" because of his postulate of "radical discontinuity between African tradition and Christian faith." Thus Kato's legacy to African theological thought is "problematic."²

In an article originally published in 1994, Bediako surveys a few representative African theologians and puts Kato "at the other extreme of the spectrum" because of the "radical discontinuity" which he "stoutly

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¹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 386.

² *Ibid.*, 391, 415.

championed.” Kato is thus excluded from the “middle ground” between Idowu’s radical continuity and Kato’s own supposed “radical discontinuity.”³ But is this “radical discontinuity” a disjunction between Christianity and African traditional religion, or between Christianity and culture? Bediako suggests that it is both.

In his thesis, Prof. Bediako compares Kato with Tertullian. Using categories from H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*,⁴ the impression is given that Kato is a rejectionist in respect to culture in the same way as Tertullian is alleged to be. Niebuhr gives Tertullian the “Christ against Culture” label, and so one assumes from Bediako that Kato too is rejectionistic in his view of culture. But this is open to question.

Mercy Oduyoye is another person who stereotypes Kato as one who rejects the African worldview. She writes: “This rejection of the African worldview by an African shows how successful the Christian missions were in alienating Africans from their ‘Africanness.’”⁵ For Oduyoye, Kato is rejectionistic toward culture.

It is frequently assumed that Kato opposed contextualization. In a recent paper, Kato was criticized for holding to “only one theology” and thus opposing contextualization. Adrian Helleman writes: “contextualization of theology is happening, and it will continue to happen, whether we like it or not. We can pretend, ostrich-like, that it is not; or we can hinder it, as Kato does, because of theological blinders . . .”⁶ Again, Kato is perceived as hindering contextualization.

A superficial glance at the table of contents of Kato’s doctoral thesis would seem to confirm this view. The title of the fifth chapter boldly proclaims: “‘African Theology’: Described and Rejected.”⁷ What more can

³ Kwame Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century,” in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, ed. S. Ngewa et al. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 62.

⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

⁵ Mercy Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 62.

⁶ Adrian Helleman, “The Fourth Self: Self-Theologizing or the Contextualization of Theology,” presented at the Jos-Bukuru Theological Society, 5th May 2003, 13, 15.

⁷ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 3rd printing (Nairobi:

one say? Is Kato not a rejectionist in respect to culture and contextualization?

It is our belief that Kato has been misunderstood by many students of African theology. Byang Kato died almost thirty years ago, in a period when African theology was just beginning. It is unfortunate that Kato is too often treated anachronistically. Too often his statements are compared with those of theologians writing twenty or thirty years later. This paper attempts a reassessment of Kato's theology within the historical context in which he lived. We believe that such a study will place Kato in the mainstream of evangelical African theology.

Historical Setting

On December 19, 1975, Byang Kato died tragically off the coast of Kenya at the age of 39. Only two years earlier, in 1973, he completed his doctorate with the submission of his thesis, published two years later as *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. In the last two years of his life, Kato was General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar (AEAM, now AEA), during which he produced a number of occasional lectures and writings.⁸

Kato's main period of theological activity is thus restricted to the first five years of the 1970s. It is thus essential that he be placed in this brief historical time period and that he be evaluated according to that time frame.

The early 1970s in Africa were a time of enormous cultural and theological ferment. Most African countries had recently become independent, and thus there was a great cultural reawakening. A cultural revolution was happening.

According to Adrian Hastings, this cultural revolution was a reaction to the lack of understanding and appreciation of the African culture by the

Evangel Publishing House, 1987), 9.

⁸ See Christina Breman, *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996), pp. 532-43, for a comprehensive bibliography of Kato's works. See Sophie de la Haye, *Byang Kato: Ambassador for Christ* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1986) for a popular biography of Kato.

European colonial officials and missionaries. Hastings, who is Roman Catholic, claims that the church was “the most subtle and the most powerful source of cultural alienation.”⁹ Thus there was a call to reject European influence and to return to African cultural roots.

President Mobutu’s policy of authenticity in Zaire was the boldest attempt to assert African cultural values. The height of this policy occurred from 1971 to 1973, precisely when Kato was writing his doctoral dissertation. Christian first names were banned throughout the country; Cardinal Malula was expelled from his residence and went into temporary exile; confessional organizations and newspapers were banned; and some major seminaries were closed.¹⁰ In these early years, the cultural revolution was taking a decidedly anti-Christian appearance.

Kato reports that in Chad traditional initiation ceremonies were revived. Part of the initiation process involved renouncing one’s Christian faith. Some Christians who refused to cooperate were tortured and even martyred.¹¹

The now almost forgotten name of Okot p’Bitek was prominent in those days. He called for a return to traditional African religions.¹²

This cultural revolution impacted theology. A renewed interest in the African traditional religions took place. The relationship between Christianity and the African traditional religions was examined. People began talking of African Christian theology, but the term in those days was open to different interpretations.

A search for an African Christianity was initiated especially by the

⁹ Adrian Hastings, *African Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 42; cf. chapter 3.

¹⁰ Ngindu Mushete, “Authenticity and Christianity in Zaire,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. E. Fashole Luke et al. (London: Rex Collings, 1978), 228-41.

¹¹ Kato, *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith* (Jos: Challenge, 1976), 21-23.

¹² Kato, “Contextualization and Religious Syncretism,” *Biblical Christianity in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1985), 26-27.

and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favoured by the church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity.¹³

In the 1960s and 1970s, people began to talk of African Theology or African Christian Theology. But there was a lack of unanimity on the term. For many it was suspect. In 1971, the venerable *Journal of Religion in Africa* advised against the usage of the term "African theology." Philip Turner wrote:

It does not seem to help much to speak of 'African Theology.' The term is viewed with suspicion because the interest in traditional religion associated with it calls up in the mind of many a return to paganism.¹⁴

Kwesi Dickson reports that one year later J.K. Agbeti also was "questioning the suitability of the expression 'African theology' as used of Christian theology in Africa: in his opinion, the expression 'African theology' is misleading in the Christian context."¹⁵ These years (1971 and 1972) were the very years when Kato rejected the term "African theology" in his doctoral thesis.

The 1960s and early 1970s saw a number of attempts to contextualize the Gospel into the African context. Some of these efforts were clearly syncretistic. In 1973, Bolaji Idowu published his *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*.¹⁶ This book glorifies the traditional religion as being truly African. Idowu concludes the book by praising a "faithful remnant" whose loyalty to the religion of their forbears will continue steadfast."¹⁷ After Kato's death, Gabriel Setiloane, Samuel Kibico and Christian Gaba published papers that advocated radical continuity between

¹³ Cited in Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology—Adaptation or Incarnation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), 20.

¹⁴ Philip Turner, "The Wisdom of the Fathers and the Gospel of Christ," in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4 (1971):64-65; cited by Kwesi Dickson in *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 122.

¹⁵ Dickson, 121.

¹⁶ Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.

Christianity and the traditional religion.¹⁸ Bediako rightly observes that if everything is continuity, wherein lies the newness of the Christian gospel?¹⁹

One of the issues being discussed during this period was the question as to whether there is only one theology or many. Although today it is common to speak of many theologies, in those days it was often assumed that there is just one Christian theology. Two examples will suffice.

In 1970 Harry Sawyerr presented a significant paper entitled "What Is African Theology?" There he quotes approvingly Tom Beecham's suggestion that "there is only one 'eternal Word of God, unchangeable' and therefore there 'can be only one theology' which has to be made incarnate in the African situation."²⁰ These are very evangelical sentiments from an "ecumenical" and a father of African theology!

A year after Kato's death, a Roman Catholic professor in Kinshasa presented a paper in Dar es Salaam with the pregnant title, "Unity of Faith and Pluralism in Theology." In this essay, Ngindu Mushete quotes with approval a French theologian who wrote: "Knowledge is one . . . Philosophy is one . . . Thus theology is primarily one." Thus there is both unity and plurality in theology.²¹ It was thus common in the 1970s to speak of one Christian theology.

During this early period, there was no complete agreement on the theological method for doing contextualization. Some people talked of adaptation, others of translation. Sawyerr referred to the many advocates "for the adaptation of Christian theology to worship." For him it was important to establish "bridgeheads" or points of contact "by which the Christian Gospel could be effectively transmitted to the African peoples."²²

¹⁸ Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20th century," 61-62.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁰ Harry Sawyerr, "What is African Theology?," *The Practice of Presence*, ed. J. Parratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 94; cf. 87.

²¹ Ngindu Mushete, "Unity of Faith and Pluralism in Theology," *The Emergent Gospel*, ed. S. Torres and V. Fabella (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), 54, fn. 3.

²² Sawyerr, "What is African Theology?," 87, 96.

The popular term “incarnation” was only beginning to become popular. The year before Kato died, the Roman Catholic bishops of Africa rejected the theology of adaptation as being “completely out-of-date” and called for “a theology of incarnation.”²³ But Protestants did not follow the Catholics instantly or universally.

On the global front in the early 1970s, there was also considerable political, social and theological ferment. The Vietnam War engaged the attention of the world. The Civil Rights movement led to the Black Power movement. Black theology and liberation theology were born at this time.

The publication of James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969 marked the formal beginning of Black Theology. Cone’s ideas were rapidly accepted in parts of South Africa. A collection of essays entitled *Black Theology: The South African Voice* was first published in 1972 but was banned by the South African government and then published in London in 1973.²⁴ One should immediately say that the unjust racial situation in America and South Africa demanded a theological response. These writers wrote out of a situation of discrimination and oppression. But their writings were reactionary. In 1974 the notable African theologian John Mbiti criticized Black Theology’s “excessive preoccupation with liberation,” and he said that this theology was not really relevant for the rest of Africa.²⁵ Salvation, or liberation, in early Black Theology was seen almost exclusively in terms of social or racial redemption. In the thirty years since these beginnings, there have been more responsible attempts at Black Theology. The works of Desmond Tutu especially come to mind. But these happened after Kato’s death.

The early 1970s also saw the emergence of Latin American liberation theology. Gustavo Gutierrez’s seminal *A Theology of Liberation* appeared in Spanish in 1971 and in English in 1973. For him, as in Black Theology,

²³ Shorter, p. 150.

²⁴ *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, ed. Basil Moore (London: C. Hurst, 1973).

²⁵ John Mbiti, “An African Views American Black Theology,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*. Vol. 1: 1966-1979, eds. J. Cone and G. Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), pp. 381-83.

salvation is primarily a political and social liberation. Gutierrez teaches a universal salvation: "salvation embraces all men and the whole man; the liberating action of Christ . . . is at the heart of the historical current of humanity."²⁶

The same universalism was becoming the official doctrine of the World Council of Churches. In the year that Kato finished his Th.D. thesis (1973), the World Council of Churches held their Commission for World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) in Bangkok. The theme of the conference was "Salvation Today." According to David Bosch, salvation was defined "exclusively in this-worldly terms."²⁷

John Stott reports that a Roman Catholic observer at Bangkok was amazed that theologians could discuss salvation for a whole conference without any mention of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith or the New Testament teaching on everlasting life.²⁸

If salvation has only social dimensions, then "mission" will be redefined. In preparation for the 1968 World Council of Churches meeting in Uppsala, the goal of mission was defined as humanization and shalom. Mission was seen primarily as social development. Bosch observes that for the World Council of Churches, the "distinction between church and world [had], for all intents and purposes, been dropped completely."²⁹ In this case, mission as evangelism becomes meaningless. This was the "ecumenical theology" to which Kato was reacting.

The early 1970s were thus a period of enormous theological experimentation and ferment. Not everything was bad. There was a greater awareness of the non-Western world and of the church's responsibilities to the world. But in the process a number of central theological concepts were being redefined. Biblical truths were being questioned. There was a need

²⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. C. Inda and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), p. 168.

²⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), pp. 396-97.

²⁸ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 96.

²⁹ Bosch, pp. 382-83.

for a prophetic voice.

Byang Kato: A Prophetic Voice

Abraham Heschel describes a prophet thus:

The prophet is a watchman, a servant, a messenger of God . . . The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But behind his austerity is love and compassion for mankind . . . The task of the prophet is to convey the word of God.³⁰

Byang Kato could be called a prophet. He challenged the prevailing doctrines of his time. He brought the word of God into his situation. He used stern and stinging language.

This is not to say that he made no mistakes. But because he felt passionately about Christ's church, he was bold enough to speak out on vital issues.

The first chapter of his doctoral thesis is prophetic. Kato writes:

The primary purpose of this book is to sound an alarm and warn Christians on both sides of the argument concerning the dangers of universalism. These dangers are theological pitfalls indeed. To forewarn is to forearm.³¹

This is clearly prophetic language.

Kato's primary fear for the church was the threats of universalism and syncretism. He was afraid that the uniqueness of the Gospel would be lost. He was concerned lest the universalistic theology of the "ecumenical movement" would penetrate and destroy the young African church. Consequently Kato often used strong language against theologians and theological movements that he felt were harmful to the African church.

In his doctoral thesis, Kato attacked the theologies of two prominent African theologians: Prof. Bolaji Idowu and Prof. John Mbiti. His primary concern was the implicit universalism and syncretism of their theologies.

³⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper, 1962), I:20, 12, 26.

³¹ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 16.

In respect to Idowu, we want to suggest that Kato was on target. An objective reading of Idowu's works suggests that for him Christianity and African traditional religion were both acceptable ways of approaching God. As a matter of fact, the traditional religion is in some respects preferable because it was more indigenous. Bediako rightly labels Idowu's approach that of "radical continuity," and, as observed above, Bediako is critical of such a radical approach.³² Kato's concern about Idowu's theology has been echoed by others since him.

Kato's treatment of John Mbiti is more problematic. In his thesis, Kato alleges that Mbiti holds to a "universalism that poses a threat to Biblical Christianity in Africa"; and that Mbiti rejects the future second coming of Christ and the reality of future eschatological events, including heaven, hell and the individual resurrection.³³

In respect to universalism, Mbiti possibly accepts Karl Barth's view that in the end God's grace will prevail and that everyone will ultimately be saved.³⁴ But a charge of universalism cannot exhaust Mbiti's thinking. A reading of his work on New Testament eschatology impresses upon one the deep christological orientation of his theology. This work opens with a significant christological statement: "The Gospel is a revolution in which Jesus Christ is at the centre as the Lord of Faith."³⁵ Later he writes:

The life that Jesus Christ brings to the sinner both now and hereafter is the heart of N.T. salvation. To reject Him is to remain in a state so terrible that the symbol of Gehenna and its associations is the most effective manner of warning that the Bible can use . . . Thus, Gehenna is a christological symbol, the negation of incorporation into Christ.³⁶

C.S. Lewis would agree with Mbiti that some of the Bible's eschatological language is symbolic. Think of Lewis' picture of hell as being a very cold and lonely place. The essence of hell, according

³² Bediako, "Understanding African Theology," 61-62.

³³ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 57, 83, 85-86.

³⁴ John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 179-81.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

to Mbiti and Lewis, would be the separation from Christ.

Mbiti is in line with much of twentieth-century New Testament theology when he emphasizes both present and future eschatology. George E. Ladd says that the meaning of the presence of the Kingdom is a new era of salvation. "The age of fulfillment is present, but the time of consummation still awaits the Age to Come."³⁷ This is essentially Mbiti's view.

Although Mbiti's final eschatological perspective may be universalistic, Mbiti's theology is strongly Christological. Universalism and syncretism are not the best descriptions of Mbiti's theology.

Mbiti's studies on African traditional religion are very learned. His *Concepts of God in Africa*,³⁸ although not without mistakes as Kato observes, is a very impressive work. But to say that "the Bible becomes superfluous in the face of such a comprehensive work"³⁹ is not fair to Mbiti's christocentric theology. In his work on eschatology, Mbiti insists that "Biblical Theology must be the basis of any theological reflection."⁴⁰ Mbiti's methodology would be what he calls "Contact theology, a Theology built upon areas of apparent similarities and contact between Christianity and traditional African concepts and practices."⁴¹

It is significant, according to Mbiti's testimony, that only ten days before his death, Kato apologized to Prof. Mbiti "for having unjustifiably attacked [him] and promised to rewrite and change the relevant parts of his book." Mbiti says that Kato's death "was certainly a major loss for African theology."⁴²

Despite an apparent misreading of parts of Mbiti, Kato's wider concerns were still valid. A few months before his death, Kato delivered an

³⁷ G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 80.

³⁸ John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970).

³⁹ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 69.

⁴⁰ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology*, 189.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴² J. Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends," in *African Theology en Route*, eds. K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 85.

important lecture criticizing African theology, ecumenical theology, black theology and liberation theology.⁴³ This lecture, first delivered as a public lecture at the University of Nairobi, can be criticized for its generalizations. However, it contains important concerns.

Kato's rejection of the term African theology was not isolated. As we have seen above, notable "ecumenical" theologians warned against the term. Kato's fear of syncretism was justified by Prof. Idowu's writings. But as we will see later, Kato did not reject contextualization.

As for ecumenical, black and liberation theologies, the historical survey above shows some of the alarming trends of the early 1970s. Generally, salvation was redefined as a social and political event. "Ecumenical" theologians often no longer spoke of the need for a personal conversion to Jesus Christ. Evangelism and missions were redefined to exclude the necessity of conversion to Christ. Justification by faith became irrelevant. These were very disturbing trends, and Kato was absolutely right to challenge them. Kato's voice was a prophetic voice.

Kato was concerned that the church would be destroyed by these theological directions. In respect to Europe and parts of North America, Kato's fears were justified. The Department of Theology at the Free University in Amsterdam can serve as an example of European trends. This university was founded in 1880 by Abraham Kuyper and it boasted professors like G.C. Berkouwer and Johannes Verkuyl. But today two of their theological professors are no longer Christian. The professor emeritus of ethics, Harry Kuitert, is no longer a Christian and according to recent reports not even a theist. Prof. Verkuyl's successor in missiology, Anton Wessels, is a universalist, and does not believe in missions.⁴⁴ This is precisely the theology that Byang Kato was so fearful of. This universalism is still very prevalent in Europe and North America.

Kato was afraid that this theology would also sweep through Africa and destroy Africa's young churches. His Th.D. thesis opens with this

⁴³ Kato, "Theological Issues in Africa," in *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 40-52.

⁴⁴ See Timothy Palmer, "The Denial of Missions in the Missiology of Anton Wessels," in *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 140-44.

sentence: "The stage is well set for universalism in Africa."⁴⁵ Kato was particularly worried that the money and influence of the World Council of Churches through the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) would destroy Africa's Christianity. As the European and American experience shows, his concern is a valid one.

Remarkably, though, in Africa Kato's fears were for the most part not realized. The last couple of decades in this continent have turned out differently. The evangelical-ecumenical divide of which Kato writes still has some validity in Europe and North America, but such language is less appropriate in 21st century Africa.

Philip Jenkins in his recent *The Next Christendom* uses language borrowed from Andrew Walls and Kwame Bediako when he says that the center of gravity of the Christian church has shifted from the north to the south. There are now more non-western than western Christians in the world. This shift is significant, Jenkins argues, because non-western Christianity tends to be more conservative. This is the case in all churches: Roman Catholic, mainline and evangelical.⁴⁶

The classic illustration of this development is the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion of 1998. Traditionally the Anglican church has been considered "ecumenical." But the "evangelical-ecumenical divide" was found inside the Anglican church with the evangelicals coming especially from Africa and the "ecumenicals" coming primarily from North America. The Nigerian Anglican bishops in particular insisted on traditional Biblical values over against those of the liberal North American bishops.

The current row over homosexuality is another example. The position of the Anglican primate of Nigeria, the Most Rev. Peter Akinola, again illustrates the evangelical posture of the Nigerian Anglican communion.

From my perspective in Nigeria, which is the country in Africa with

⁴⁵ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

the most Christians, the evangelical-ecumenical divide is not prominent here. The mainline churches are increasingly evangelical in their worldview. The Nigerian picture confirms the truth of Jenkins' thesis.

If there is a theological divide in Africa, it may be between the "ivory-tower" university departments of religion on the one hand and the African grassroots Christianity on the other. But even this divide is less pronounced now that there are more evangelical lecturers in the African universities.

Byang Kato was a prophet in the early 1970s. He called attention to dangerous trends in Africa and worldwide. Although he was not without mistakes, his basic message was and still holds true.

Christ and Culture

In light of the above, what is Kato's view of culture and the traditional African religion? When Bediako calls Kato a representative of radical discontinuity, what precisely is meant? Is this a radical discontinuity between Christ and the traditional African religion or between Christ and the African culture?

As to the former, it should be said that radical discontinuity with the traditional religion is not always bad. The Old Testament prophets insisted on a clean break with the pagan religion. Idols and temples were destroyed and pagan priests were killed. Elijah's words on Mt. Carmel are still relevant: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" (1 Kings 18:21). And, according to the book of Acts, Paul was often rejectionistic towards paganism.

While Idowu and Mbiti emphasized the positive aspects of traditional religion, often glorifying the past, Kato spoke from an experience of bondage to the traditional religion. In his own traditional culture, "the life of a Jaba person is dominated by fear. . . . The spirits are always associated with 'Kumo,' Satan. . . . The dominating fears and superstitions concerning the spirit world are so dreadful that an instantaneous and complete cure is what Jaba people need."⁴⁷ Radical discontinuity in this context is not bad

⁴⁷ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 36-38.

but rather liberating.

But in terms of the worldviews of African traditional religion and Christianity, Kato recognizes that there is continuity as well as discontinuity. Frequently he insists that the traditional African had a knowledge of God: the “Jaba believe in the existence of a Supreme Being”; Africans “have the vestiges of Imago Dei”; “it has been firmly established that the traditional worshippers have an awareness of the Supreme Being who is none other than God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”; “non-Christian religions prove man has a concept of God.”⁴⁸ Surely there is continuity here. But in line with theologians like Luther and Calvin, Kato teaches that this knowledge of God is incomplete.

There are other points of contact between the traditional religion and Christianity. Kato observes that the “Jaba believe in a future life;” also the “Jaba can and do conceive of a Supreme Being and the spirit world.”⁴⁹ Here too there is continuity coupled with discontinuity.

Although he does not share Bediako’s use of the Latin term, it is obvious that the traditional religion for Kato was a *praeparatio evangelica*. Kato’s recognition of these points of contact is parallel to Sawyer’s “bridgeheads by which the Christian Gospel could be effectively transmitted to the African peoples.”⁵⁰

In respect to traditional religion, then, Kato stands on the middle ground holding to both continuity and discontinuity between the Gospel and the traditional religion. In respect to culture, too, Kato also assumes the middle ground.

In his *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith*, Kato states that originally culture was God-given. It is God who placed us in the world and in our culture. “Every people are a creation of God, and God has given every people a life-style.” However from the Fall, sin corrupted culture. “Idolatry and immorality have characterized every culture.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29, 75, 110, 181.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 41, 44.

⁵⁰ Sawyer, “What is African Theology?” 96.

⁵¹ Kato, *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith*, 34-35.

Yet Kato asserts that “every culture has both good things and bad things.” This is because man is made in the image of God. It is wrong, for example, for missionaries to condemn all of African culture.⁵²

Kato was obviously an African who loved his African culture. He was not a rejectionist, like H. Richard Niebuhr’s Tertullian; instead he was conversionist like Niebuhr’s Augustine calling for the transformation of culture. Repeatedly in his *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith* Kato proclaims: “The Bible becomes the final judge of their culture . . . *The Bible is the final judge of every culture . . . THE BIBLE MUST BE FINAL JUDGE OF EVERY CULTURE.*”⁵³ He compares the Word of God to a surgical knife that must be used on every culture.⁵⁴ This is the language of transformation, not rejectionism.

Elsewhere Kato states:

It is God’s will that Africans, on accepting Christ as their Saviour, become Christian Africans. Africans who become Christians should, therefore, remain Africans wherever their culture does not conflict with the Bible. It is the Bible that must judge culture. Wherever a conflict results, the cultural element must give way.⁵⁵

Augustine could not have said it better!

Finally, if culture is not all bad, then contextualization is possible. To assert that Kato did not believe in contextualization is to disregard the primary sources.

As boldly as Kato rejected the term “African theology” in the early 1970s, so boldly did he insist on contextualization. In 1974, using language similar to that of Pope Paul VI, Kato said: “Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary.”⁵⁶ A year later he insisted:

⁵² Ibid., 34-36.

⁵³ Ibid., 12, 31, 56 (italics and capitals are Kato’s).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁵ Kato, “Theological Issues in Africa,” 42.

⁵⁶ Kato, “Contextualization and Religious Syncretism in Africa,” 23.

Contextualize without compromise. Let Christianity truly find its home in Africa, by adopting local hymnology, using native language, idioms and concepts to express the unchanging faith.⁵⁷

Again, in his doctoral thesis, Kato wrote: "Express Christianity in a truly African context, allowing it to judge the African culture and never allow the culture to take precedence over Christianity." This should be done by "expressing theological concepts in terms of the African situation." Significantly, "the squabbles of the West do not have to be the pattern for the younger churches. The final word has not yet been said in expressing Christianity."⁵⁸ With clear language like that, it is baffling how one can suggest that Kato opposes contextualization.

One scholar writing in 1986 suggested that as of then there were three different levels of contextualization: translation, adaptation and incarnation.⁵⁹ We have already seen that in 1975 incarnation was not popular among Protestants. An evaluation of Kato's writings suggests that he would be somewhere in between the translation and adaptation methods of contextualization.

We noted Pope Paul's address in 1969 advocating adaptation as a method of contextualization. Five years later, Byang Kato also advocated adaptation: "The New Testament has given us the pattern for cultural adaptations. . . . Contextualization can take place in liturgy, dress, language, church service and any other form of expression of the Gospel truth."⁶⁰

But in the same speech, Kato said: "Not only should the message be preached in the language best understood by the congregation, but the terminology of theology should be expressed the way common people can understand."⁶¹ This suggests the translation approach.

⁵⁷ Kato, "Christianity as an African Religion," in *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 38.

⁵⁸ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 182.

⁵⁹ Phillip Baker, "Transplant or Transpose," *TCNN Research Bulletin* 16 (1986): 4-26; reprinted in *TCNN Research Bulletin* 27 (1994): 13-26.

⁶⁰ Kato, "Contextualization and Religious Syncretism in Africa," 24.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

(Kato's refusal to substitute a different grain for the mustard seed⁶² should not be held against him. The new Hausa Bible translation of Matthew 13:31, like the old version, speaks of a "kwayar mastad.")

Like Prof. Osadolor Imasogie in his *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*,⁶³ Kato says that contextualized theology should address those concerns that affect African Christians. He says that we should scratch where it itches. "The African problems of polygamy, family structure, spirit world, liturgy, to mention a few, need to be tackled by evangelical African theologians."⁶⁴ For Kato a contextual theology should address issues existential to the African Christian.

Kato defines contextualization as "making concepts or ideas relevant in a given situation."⁶⁵ As a theologian concerned about bringing the Gospel of Christ to his own situation, Kato certainly believed in contextualization.

Conclusion

One can silence a prophet by painting him as a radical or an extremist. This is not only unfortunate but also unfair. Byang Kato is not a representative of "radical discontinuity"; instead he is a mainline evangelical who sought to defend the faith and to contextualize it in the African culture. Kato wrote thirty years ago and should be judged by that historical context. Theological terminology and language were different then; and the ecclesiastical scene was not the same then. An evaluation of the African church today would put Kato solidly in the mainstream of African Christianity.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Osadolor Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Ibadan: University Press, 1983).

⁶⁴ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 182.

⁶⁵ Kato, "Contextualization and Religious Syncretism in Africa," in *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 23.