

A Response to the paper Salvation from an African Perspective[†]

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The African reality has its own perspective, and the particular situations are so different that it will be no use looking for a universal tool to interpret it. However, a relationship of solidarity links together all the African theologians : the salvation of African people by deciphering the message of Jesus' good news addressed to them.

The methodological approach of Dr. Mugabe is doing theology on biblical grounds, and sources in relation to particular historical context : "African Christian theologies must be rooted in the cultural, social, political, religious and economic context of African life and thought". The cultural and societal differences form the basis of the contextualization of theology. This is worked out with reference to salvation in Shona religion : an anthropocentric-life-affirming-religion. The main notion of salvation is understood and expanded in the religious setting which has to do with physical and immediate dangers that threaten individual and community. The attention is drawn to dichotomizing of the horizontal and the vertical relationship in human spirituality. Dr. Mugabe sees this as one of the major weaknesses of the western missionary communication of the Gospel in Africa. However, he does not fail to recognise the new understanding of salvation which the western Christianity has brought in, that has broadened the parameter and perspective of traditional African concern. One consistent thread can be discerned running through the paper is the quest for an identity as the starting point of salvation.

The quest for identity is so central that it is an issue which every Christian has had to face in some form. One of the major questions facing Indian Christians is how they can hold together their identity as Indians with their identity as Christians. The

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overlap between the modern missionary movement and colonialism provides the problematic starting point for the process of defining the identity of Indian Christian. In addition to this, the awareness of integrity and legitimacy of other religious traditions make it difficult for Christians to make universal truth claims about Christian faith. There is vague sense of uneasiness in some circle. The challenge is how to face scandal of particularity by making the concern of salvation contingent upon a Jewish prophet in a pluralistic context. What is the importance of one event, the death and resurrection of Jesus, if God is always redeeming life as part of His ongoing work of creation.

If salvation is a transforming event based on hope in a redeeming God, then He can do, and in fact does, something altogether new and even unpredictable. This allows us to refuse to regard any structure as final either in the church or in the society. According to M. M. Thomas, an Indian theologian, salvation is a battle for true human existence. Thomas' vision for the future is of spiritually purposeful persons realising themselves in an ultimately meaningful history within the context of God's purpose for the world. Therefore the Gospel of salvation must work itself out also in the realms of history and politics and in the campaign towards conditions where one can live as human.

Traditional Africa and India are religious. The religious phenomenon still controls the sub-conscious life of many. Therefore quest for salvation is search for an authentic life. While African Shona religion is concerned about this world, one of India's religious traditions affirms the ultimate meaning of human life to be found by looking away from the events of history to that 'inner cave of the heart' where immortal self knows itself to be one with the universal self.

Culture is a conception of the human being, the world and God. To destroy a people is to destroy their culture. Cultural crisis represents a real threat. Salvation in African context means wrestling with those issues that hinder from reaching full potential. The intertwining of religion and culture is a reality of the people of Africa and India. Their movements for liberation are rallied around their cultural and religious roots. A negative view of religion is understandable in the context of resurgent role of religion in our world today. Religious resurgence is closely connected with what is now commonly talked about as religious fundamentalism : sectarian mentalities and attitudes. The demolition of the ancient Babri Masjid by the Sang Parivar on the 6th December 1992 in modern India after 46 years of independence is an example of religion being used by politicians

for their interest. But Religion can provide the inspiration and critical tools to forge ahead the search for an authentic life. For example, the struggle of Indian Christian Dalits is a story that illustrates the struggle of the oppressed. Dalit theology is a radical discontinuity with the traditional Indian Christian Theology because dominant traditions in Indian Christian Theology is essentially Brahminic in character. It is an authentic search by a group of the oppressed people for human identity and their roots in the Indian society.

The task of contextualization is to understand God who is God of all nations. Distinction is often made that there is an element in the Christian tradition which concerns the central revelation of God in Jesus Christ, about which there can be no compromise. The other elements are social and cultural which are accidental. The basic question still remains whether it is as easy as it is assumed to make a clear cut distinction. In developing contextual theologies it is important to look at these aspects and integrate them. The tendency to absolutize the context in terms of a socio-political-religious-cultural entity needs to be avoided because danger could be to develop an uncritical attitude towards one's own history, religion and culture. What God does in one particular time in history cannot be overlooked and this has also meaning and significance for those who live in other parts of the world.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God has acted decisively for human redemption. It is precisely the cross which teaches us with what seriousness God does take human history. The fundamental to redemption is God's solidarity with the creation. The darkness of the Cross and the new day of the resurrection together constitute a promise that God redeemed, is redeeming and will redeem.

May I express my sincere thanks to Dr. Henry Mugabe for this paper. I trust this has opened up many issues for discussion.

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