

DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN AFRICA AND HOW AN AFRICAN THEOLOGIAN CAN CONTRIBUTE MEANINGFULLY TO THE 'LOCI' OF TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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Abstract

The clamour and quest for the development of African Christian Theology which is distinct, viable and separate from that of Western Christian theological tradition has been an issue of concern and interest among African theologians. This concern is predicated on the claims that the European missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa replaced African traditional religion with Christianity in order to make Africans docile to European domination and attacks. Consequently, Africans lost their religion, culture and identity; and Christianity is associated with these damages. Accordingly, this awareness gave rise to concerted efforts by Africans to regain their culture, identity and religion. Thus, the need for the development of African Christian theology became a matter of concern and interest to both African and non-African theologians. However, there was no agreement among the African theologians on the concept, methodology and content for the development of African Christian theology. This work contends that there is need for the development of African Christian theology and that African theologians can contribute meaningfully to the 'loci' of traditional Christian theology. An attempt is made to examine some definitions of African Christian theology in order to clarify the concept and methodology. As a way of expressing the uniqueness of African culture in Christian theology for the benefit and readership of others in the Western world and globally, this work underscores the concept and methodology for the development of African Christian theology and how an African theologian can contribute meaningfully to the existing literature of traditional Christian theology. The work also suggests some theological themes that have relevance to the Church in Africa which should be explored and developed by African theologians. Some identified areas in basic Christian doctrines which African theologians need to explore in order to contribute meaningfully to the 'loci' of traditional Christian theology are: God, Christology, Pneumatology, Anthropology, Ecclesiology, Soteriology and Eschatology. These basic Christian doctrines should be explicated in African cultural terms without compromising the core message of the Christian gospel.

Keywords: African Christian theology, loci, syncretism, enculturation.

Introduction

The development of African Christian theology which is distinct, viable and separate from that of western Christian theological tradition has been a subject of concern and interest among African theologians. This clamour for the development of African Christian theology was predicated on the socio-political and religious situations in which the African theologians found themselves. Specifically, it was the colonization of Africans by the Europeans. It was claimed that this colonization disorganized the cultural and religious values of Africans and replaced them with the European socio-political, cultural and religious life. As Aben (2008) puts it, "Africans lost their unique identity and instead took on pseudo-European identity" (10).

It was further claimed that the European missionaries replaced African traditional religion with Christianity in order to make Africans docile to European domination and attacks on African socio-political, cultural and religious institutions (Aben, 2008). Thus, the Christianity that Europeans brought to Africa was suppressive to African religion, culture, socio-political life, economic system and African identity. Accordingly, the development of African Christian theology became a matter of concern and interest both to Africans and to non-African theologians. In the 1960s, African theologians like Mbiti, Idowu, etc, shifted base from western Christian theology and advocated for an African Christian theology. However, there was no agreement on the concept, methodology and content for the development of African Christian theology. This lack of agreement among African theologians does not in any way downplay the need for the development of such a theology. Rather, it poses a serious challenge on African theologians to develop a viable and authentic Christian theology for the Church in Africa.

In this work, an attempt is made to examine some definitions of African Christian theology in order to clarify the concept. Some of the suggested or proposed methodologies for the development of African Christian theology, such as syncretism and enculturation, are also examined. This is done to assert the need for the development of a Christian theology that suits the needs of Africans. The work also postulates how an African theologian can contribute meaningfully to the 'loci' of traditional Christian theology.

Defining African Christian Theology

A definition of African Christian theology is necessary to clarify the concept, as well as the expectations of African theologians regarding the subject matter. Thus, an attempt is made to examine some of the definitions of African Christian theology which has been put forward by some African theologians. It is worth stating from the outset that there is an inherent difficulty in the terminology, "African Christian theology." This is due to the fact that the operative terms "African" and "Theology" pose some difficulties in defining African Christian theology. One of such difficulties is how to determine what makes a theology African. However, a discussion of these terminologies is beyond the scope of this work. The difficulties are only cited to underscore the problems associated with a coherent definition of African Christian theology.

One of the definitions of African Christian theology advanced by a group of eminent African theologians in 1966 at the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) held in Ibadan reads: "African Christian theology is Christian theology by Africans for Africans" (Dickson and Ellingworth, 1969:9). This definition looks concise, apt and precludes non-Africans (westerners) from developing African Christian theology. It suggests that the task of developing African Christian theology lies solely on Africans. This definition also aims at ensuring that Africans understand and accept African Christian theology as their own. The definition is laudable because it seems to maximize the likelihood of evolving a Christian theology that is truly African. However, this definition is silent about how to develop such a Christian theology that will be uniquely African.

Aben (2008) cites the All Africa Conference of Churches definition of an authentic African Christian theology as "the reformation or re-expression of Christianity in terms of the receiving culture, aimed at disengaging the essence of Christianity from western appearances and patterns it has built up over two thousand years" (28). This modified definition of African Christian theology implies that the removal of western cultural elements in Christianity and replacing them with African cultural elements will evolve an African Christian theology. The problem inherent in this definition has to do with the plurality of African cultures. Even if the problem of cultural plurality is resolved, there is still the problem of knowing how to integrate Christianity with African culture to evolve an African Christian theology.

Aben (2008) also cites J.K. Agbeti's definition of African Christian theology as "an attempt to liberate Africans from colonialism and imperialism under which European missionaries had subjected Africans" (37). This definition conceives African Christian theology as a discourse or an act aimed at liberating Africans from their socio-political oppression or subjugation. It suggests that the task of African Christian theology is essentially to liberate Africans from their dehumanization. The problem with this definition is that it limits African Christian theology to dealing with phenomenological issues. By implication, African Christian theology should exist for a purpose, and when that purpose is accomplished, it becomes obsolete and a historical issue. However, addressing socio-political issues in Africa cannot define or evolve an authentic African Christian theology.

African theologians like Mbiti, Idowu and Fashola-Luke evolved another modified definition of African Christian theology as follows: "A theology based on the biblical faith of Africans, and which speaks to African souls" (Shorter, 1975:23). This definition leaves an unresolved question as to what "speaks to African souls." This definition is vague or ambiguous because it leaves African theologians to speculate or guess "what speaks to African souls"; and we cannot grasp the concept of African Christian theology by speculation and guesses.

African theologians from the evangelical circle postulated a definition of African Christian theology as "the reflection on, and exposition of the scriptures by African Christian theologians using African thought-forms and semantics" (Aben, 2008:44). This definition suggests that what makes Christian theology authentically African is the use of African thought-forms and semantics to interpret the scriptures and communicate the gospel message to Africans in a coherent manner. As laudable as this definition sounds, there is a defect because it seems to equate African understanding with Christian theology. This is suggested by the emphasis on African thought - forms and semantics.

One glaring fact in all the definitions examined above is that they did not fully capture the essence of African Christian theology. This failure is due to the erroneous concept of African Christian theology by having Africans as the central focus. However, in order to arrive at an acceptable definition of African Christian theology, there is the need to distinguish between the objective and the subject of African Christian theology. All

the definitions examined above clearly show that “African theologians want African Christian theology to speak to African souls, to restore African dignity or identity, and to liberate Africans from their socio-political and religious suffering under colonialism and apartheid” (Aben, 2008:48). This concept of African Christian theology makes the objective central instead of the subject, who is God. There is no doubt that God (as revealed in the Scriptures) is the subject of all Christian theologies, and must, therefore, be central in African Christian theology. It is this putting of African Christian theology in the correct perspective that gives credence to Tersur Aben’s definition of African Christian theology.

Aben (2008) defines African Christian theology as “a study of God’s nature, words and deeds” (48). This definition is apt because it makes God central in the concept of African Christian theology. This definition makes it incumbent on African theologians to reflect on God: his nature, deeds and words to humanity in general (Africans inclusive), and also puts African Christian theology in proper perspective. This shift of focus in African Christian theology, from Africans to God, is foundational for the development of an authentic Christian theology in Africa.

Methodology of African Christian Theology

Even though African theologians agree on the necessity for the development of an African Christian theology, there is no agreement on the methodology for evolving such a theology. All the suggested methodologies by African theologians for developing African Christian theology fall under two general categories, namely, *syncretism* and *enculturation*.

In an attempt to evolve an African Christian theology, leading African theologians like Mbiti, Idowu and Fashole-Luke suggest that there should be a synthesis of Christianity with African traditional religion (Aben, 2008). Thus, for them, the fusion of African traditional religion with Christianity will render Christianity an authentically African religion. This methodology of fusing two religions is called *syncretism*. This methodology suggests that the compatible elements of Christianity and African traditional religion should be identified and fused together. However, one wonders how two incompatible religions like Christianity and African traditional religion can be fused together. This is not to say that there are no areas of agreement between Christianity and African traditional religion; but these similarities are few and very superficial

with regards to details. This makes the task of fusing the two religions very difficult and impossible because there is a wide irreconcilable difference between Christianity and African traditional religion in terms of basic doctrines. Even though it is possible to borrow some religious elements from African traditional religion to explain some eternal truths of Christianity to Africans, it is extremely impossible to fuse the two religions together because they are incompatible. Thus, syncretism should be rejected because it conflicts with orthodox Christian theology, and therefore, cannot yield or evolve an authentic African Christian theology.

Another widely accepted methodology among African theologians for evolving an authentic African Christian theology is *enculturation*. This view advocates for an integration of elements of African culture with Christianity to evolve or yield African Christian theology. This methodology is expressed with terms like “*localization*,” “*contextualization*,” “*indigenization*,” and “*enculturation*” of theology (Aben, 2008:106). *Enculturation*, as a methodology grew out of a growing sense that the theologies being inherited from the westerners did not fit well into African cultural circumstances. There is therefore the need to adapt theological reflection to the African context and worldview (Schreiter, 1985). Hillman (1993) posits that:

The principle of enculturation should be understood as the church’s effort to communicate the message of Christ by incarnating it in the lives and cultures of each people, thereby enabling them to bring forth from their own living traditions, original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought (3).

Imasogie (1983) intensifies the need for enculturation as follows:

The *Word* did not become *flesh* in the African environment and consequently the Eternal Christ could not be existentially apprehended. In that circumstance, Christianity came to be regarded as a foreign religion that had been transplanted in a foreign soil and did not take root. Consequently, many African Christians perceived the “God” of Christianity as a “stranger-God,” the god of the white man, who is unfamiliar with the local spiritual problems. To these Africans, Christianity was of no practical use in times of existential crisis. It seemed much more reasonable to them to revert to traditional practices when faced with serious situations unfamiliar to the God of the white man (69).

Thus, enculturation becomes the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in the light of their own cultural circumstances. Imasogie argues that if Christian theology is to be relevant for the African, his world-view and self-understanding must be taken into serious account (14). Ukpong (1984) sees enculturation as “an attempt to give African expression to the Christian faith within a theological framework” (501). According to Ukpong, this “involves a conscious engagement of European Christian thinking and African religious thought in serious dialogue for the purpose of integrating Christianity into the life and culture of African people” (501).

As laudable as this methodology (enculturation) seems to be, it is inadequate for evolving an authentic African Christian theology because of the diversity of culture in Africa. Secondly, enculturation shifts the focus of African Christian theology from God to African culture. It is a discourse on God, his deeds and words that can yield African Christian theology and not a discourse on African culture. As stated earlier, the concept of African Christian theology, to a large degree, determines the methodology for evolving such a theology. Thus, Tersur Aben’s definition of African Christian theology as “a critical analysis and discourse on God: his nature, deeds and words to humanity” provides a clue for a possible and viable methodology.

I agree with Aben (2008) that the right theological method that will yield a viable Christian theology in Africa is that which the patristic African theologians used that led to the development of the Christian theology that we call “systematic theology” (179-180). This methodology requires African theologians “to critically reflect on God: who he is, what he says, and what he does” (181). This involves a biblical interpretation and critical analysis of Christian doctrines to develop a viable Christian theology in Africa. Accordingly, African theologians need to cultivate full knowledge of biblical attestations to God, using philosophical tools and biblical materials to develop African Christian theology. This methodology uses philosophy and linguistic tools to clarify the biblical assertions about God in such a way that African Christians can understand and accept the true meaning and significance of the Christian message.

The need for the development of a Christian Theology in Africa

The central thesis of this work is to assert the need for the development of a Christian theology that is truly African, and how an African theologian

can contribute meaningfully to the existing literature of traditional Christian theology. Firstly, the development of African Christian theology will project the right concept of the subject matter as a discourse on God: his nature, deeds and works. Such a theology will re-direct African theologians from the wrong concept of developing a Christian theology that is different from European Christian theology and which helps to restore original African identity or dignity. It will also re-focus African theologians to rely much on biblical revelation about God in developing African Christian theology. One way of redressing this wrong concept is to speak about a “Christian theology” in Africa rather than African Christian theology. This right concept of African Christian theology will help African theologians to develop a biblically-based Christian theology in Africa.

Secondly, the task of developing a viable Christian theology in Africa will represent the practical and definite action by African theologians to document their Christian faith without any feeling of intimidation. It will also serve as an academic exercise in which African theologians can exhibit and apply all their critical faculties to relate their faith to the African context. This should be done in such a way that it is relevant to Africans, and at the same time, it has a universal appeal. The Church universal cannot afford to lose the contributions of Africans with regards to Christian theology. Thus, African theologians ought to develop a Christian theology in Africa that transcends “Africanism” (African mental thinking) and has a universal appeal.

Thirdly, African theologians ought to develop a Christian theology in Africa to consolidate and validate the Christian faith and message in Africa. Such a theology will enable African Christians to relate their faith to the African context. Thus, African Christian theology should be developed to address the deficiency and superficial Christianity in Africa which Imasogie (1983) describes as follows:

Christianity, for many Africans, remains a foreign religion. The sad implication is that many Africans have not accepted Christianity completely as the all-sufficient religion that meets all human needs. The truth of this assertion is borne out by the fact that in times of existential crisis many respectable African Christians revert to traditional religious practices as the means for meeting their spiritual needs (23).

In other words, the development of a viable Christian theology in Africa will deepen the faith of African Christians, as well as contribute to the rooting of the gospel (Christian faith) in African soil. It will help African Christians to answer the question of “how they can be Christian and African” (Parratt, 1997:4). This will make African Christian theology an expression of the Christian faith in the African context, and also help Christians in Africa to see the relevance of their faith to their everyday life.

Fourthly, African theologians ought to develop a Christian theology in Africa that will complement the efforts of the African Independent Churches, as a way of serving the needs of the Church in Africa. The absence of a viable Christian theology in Africa is contributory to the thriving of African Independent Churches where “Africans consciously constructed a Christian theology independent of the mother churches” (Schoffeleers, 1988:112). There is no intention whatsoever to condemn the establishment of African Independent Churches. However, some of the theologies propounded in these African Independent Churches are grossly deficient and sometimes misleading. Perhaps, this is the price that African theologians had to pay for their inability to develop a viable Christian theology in Africa. However, all hope is not lost; there is an urgent need to develop a viable Christian theology in Africa that will correct the abuses and excesses of the African Independent Churches. This suggestion presupposes that the emergence of African Independent Churches serves as a breeding ground for the development of a viable and authentic Christian theology in Africa. In other words, we can build on the theology found in the African Independent Churches by putting them in proper perspective for relevance in Africa and for global acceptability and appeal. This will translate the development of African Christian theology from the realm of illusion to a theological reality.

How an African theologian can contribute meaningfully to the ‘Loci’ of traditional Christian Theology

It is worth stating that the untiring efforts of African theologians over the years have yielded a solid theological foundation for the development of Christian theology in Africa. Remarkably, the various theological contributions by African theologians provide the platform on which we can now build and develop a viable Christian Theology in Africa. A major prerequisite for meaningful contribution to traditional Christian theology by African theologians is a deep knowledge and application of biblical

languages such as Hebrew and Greek. Thus, an African theologian can blend biblical scholarship with philosophical reflection to give the Church in Africa a vibrant statement of its faith in the Christian God. By so doing, they will be able to relate the biblical world to the African context, and to apply the right hermeneutical method to the African situation. An African theologian must also seek to address (explicate) and clarify (elucidate) some basic Christian doctrines which have direct bearings with the African context. Some of the theological themes that have relevance to the Church in Africa which should be explored by African theologians are: doctrine of God, Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, anthropology, ecclesiology and eschatology, to mention but a few.

There is a consensus among African theologians that the Bible is the primary source of African Christian theology and the primary record of God's revelation. Since all theologies center on God, the task of developing a viable Christian theology in Africa must begin with a critical reflection on God: his nature, deeds and words. Africans are limited in their understanding of God, and therefore, need to know what God has done and is doing, as well as what God has said and is saying to them. This limited understanding of God by Africans is expressed by Klaus Fiedler et al (1998), who quoted Omoyajowo as saying:

The God that was introduced to Africa was a completely foreign God and this robbed Christianity of its universality. In spite of its civilizing and educating nature, this religion became spiritually unsatisfactory. The African could not really see its relevance to his life. The result was an ambivalent spiritual life. In times of crisis, the believer could revert back to traditional measures (62).

The above statement intensifies the need for African theologians to reflect on, or grapple with the scriptural revelation of God and relate its message clearly to Africans and the world at large.

Another area where an African theologian can contribute meaningfully is on Christology. An African theologian can explore the salvific and mediatorial role of Christ and apply them to the African situation. This biblical image of Christ as mediator is analogous to the African concept of ancestors. Africans believe that no one can approach the Almighty God directly except through the ancestors or divinities. This is the sense in which the mediatorial role of Christ becomes relevant to Africans. Thus,

the role of Jesus Christ as a living Saviour and mediator is very essential to sustain African spirituality.

Pneumatology or the study of Holy Spirit is another area that an African theologian should explore. Africans, by nature, are living with the consciousness of a world that is infested with spirits, both good and evil. Thus, African theologians should explore the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, with special emphasis on spiritual gifts. The African theologian should relate the activity of the Holy Spirit to vital force as against the ancestral spirits and evil powers. The operation of the Holy Spirit is grossly abused in the African Independent Churches, and our African Christian theologians need to speak out and teach the right doctrine about the Holy Spirit.

An African theologian also needs to contribute in the area of soteriology or the doctrine of salvation. The salvation that believers have in Christ is holistic; it covers atonement, deliverance from sin, demons and evil powers. Western Christian theology seems to proclaim or emphasize the salvation of the soul to the neglect of physical well-being. Africans are living daily with the reality and consciousness of an unsafe spiritual and physical environment infested with evil powers and their nefarious activities. Thus, salvation for Africans is holistic and includes protection or deliverance from charms, witchcraft, epidemics and evil powers, etc. This is the kind of salvation that appeals to Africans; they are not much concerned about going to heaven, but about living a happy life here on earth. This is a challenge to African theologians to re-interpret the salvation package in which Christ accomplished all these expectations and much more.

African theologians should also contribute in the area of anthropology or the study of man. One area of concern to Africans has to do with man's relation to God and with the unseen forces. Africans are also concerned about the destiny of man; that is, they want to know the future destiny of man. An African Christian theologian should engage in studies about man and his rebellious nature, and God's remedial programme for man and his future destiny, as a way of reaching Africans and the world in general with the gospel message. The sinful nature of man and its detrimental effects should be impressed on Africans.

Another vital area that should be explored by Christian theologians in Africa is ecclesiology or the study of the Church. The Church as a

community of believers in Christ is very significant, because Africans live a communal life. Thus, Africans place much value on societal or communal life as against the individualistic life of the westerners. This idea of communal existence by Africans is exemplified by the Church. The Christian Church exists as a community of believers; and it is made up of those who are living now, unborn children and the dead saints. This notion or concept of the Church captures the communal understanding of Africans. This is the sense in which the Church finds its meaning in the life of Africans who emphasize the unbroken relationships between the living and the 'living-dead'.

Eschatology, which has to do with the study of the lasting things, is another area of consideration. One area in eschatology that African theologians should explore is the subject of life after death. There are a lot of speculations among Africans and humanity in general about what happens after death. African traditional religion and other world religions talk about **reincarnation** which has no biblical support. The Roman Catholic theology talks about **purgatory** after death as an intermediary place before translation to heaven. These challenges make it incumbent on African theologians to explore and explicate the biblical teachings on the subject matter for a better understanding.

The biblical themes mentioned above are not in any way exhaustive. Ultimately, any literature on African Christian theology must be grounded on a solid biblical foundation and should be concerned with basic and essential Christian doctrines in order not to be classified as a situational or phenomenological theology.

Conclusion

This work examines some definitions of African Christian theology and discovered that there is no unanimity among African theologians as to the concept of African Christian theology. This lack of agreement on the concept of African Christian theology also warranted the lack of agreement on the methodology for developing such a theology in Africa. The study also examines the two methodologies for developing African Christian theology, namely, **syncretism** and **enculturation**, and discovered that they are inadequate for yielding a viable Christian theology in Africa. The reason for the inadequacy of the two methodologies is that they deviate from the central focus of Christian

theology which is *a reflection on God*: his nature, words and deeds. Consequently, I concurred with Aben's definition of African Christian theology which is also in line with his methodology for developing a viable Christian theology in Africa. That methodology explicates Christian beliefs about God as revealed in the Scriptures and summarized in doctrines, creeds, and confessions of the Church. This should be done using African linguistic syntaxes and semantics.

Secondly, the work asserts that despite the disagreements in concept, methodology and content of African Christian theology, we ought to develop a viable Christian theology in Africa that will grapple with the challenges of explicating and translating basic Christian doctrines in such a way that Africans can easily comprehend and accept them. A viable Christian theology in Africa is also needed to complement the efforts of the African Independent Churches, and to correct their theological abuses and excesses. Finally, a viable Christian theology in Africa is needed to promote biblical scholarship among African theologians.

Finally, the work identifies some areas in basic Christian doctrines in which an African theologian can contribute meaningfully to the '*loci*' of traditional Christian theology. These basic doctrines should be explicated in African cultural terms without compromising the message of the Christian gospel. By so doing, the uniqueness of the African culture is expressed in Christian theology for the benefit and readership of others in the western world and globally. This is how we can remain Christian theologians and still be African, and to translate the development of African Christian theology from the realm of illusion to a theological reality.

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