

AFRICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY: AGENDA DRIVEN STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZATION IN THE NIGERIAN CHURCH

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Abstract

There are many priorities to African theology that deserve absolute consideration. This is because Africa is seemingly a continent that has globally remained the centre for researchers. The theme for African Liberation Theology has always been about concerns for the marginalized masses and socio-political liberation for the economically disadvantaged. To my mind, an honest analysis of African reality shows that the human situations are urgently yearning for a sincere theology of liberation. Various kinds of social injustice are very much operative at various levels, namely, political, economic, social even religious. The dialectics of the struggles between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have nots; the employed and the unemployed, the powerful and powerless, evident in Latin America for many years and which gave rise to her own brand of liberation theology has become a common place in Africa and has proved itself a great source of worry for the African masses. In effect, what this means is that in Africa many socio-political structures are sinful and unjust and these call for liberation and transformation. Consequently, Africa is ripe for a theology of liberation since injustices and other evils are incarnated in her socio-political structures.

Keywords: African, Theology, Liberation, Socio-Political

Introduction

Since independence, what has characterized the African in his/her concrete and historical setting is his/her continuous struggle for liberation directed against one or the other Africa's major sociopolitical ills. At times the liberation struggle has taken on the character of political decolonization. At other times, freedom from economic dependence; at other times too, structural violence, oppression, hunger, disease, unemployment, and so on. However, the struggle has not solely been a yearning for liberation from want, disease,

racism, violence, oppression. The African has also been out for self-assertion, self-projection, integral development, active participation in history, full mastery. This suggests that the work of liberating African nations, which is a continent of immense diversity, according to Oborji is not only on the level of geographical areas, but also includes cultural, sociological, political, religious and economic levels. Though Africa is a diversified whole, its unity can be seen in their tenets of African world view, life principles and unity of spirit (137).

Liberation Theology is a religious movement that arose in the mid-20th century within the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. Liberation theologies emanate less from the structured learning centres than from the grassroots societal levels. It is a social and political movement within the church, which aims to interpret the biblical message through the lived experiences of the poor and the oppressed masses. In other words, it seeks to apply religion by empowering the poor and the oppressed through political and civic affairs. In Liberation Theology, the socio-political experiences and abject poverty provoke the alternative reading of the Bible; especially when the ecclesial sacraments become politicized as weapons of social injustice (Barga 121).

The Context of Liberation Theology

African liberation theology is a theological response to the problems of the African people who are subjected to economic poverty, political injustice, religious manipulation without any justified reason. It is critical reflections, under the word of God, on the African experiences of poverty, weakness and oppression. Liberation theology is a cry for redemption and justice. African liberation theology, therefore, is one of these modes or main tasks of African theology as a distinct system. Indeed, African liberation theology is known to have been borne out of the people's own experience of life situations as unjustly dominated, systematically exploited, racially oppressed, structurally poor, and in many cases, violently brutalized (Barga 122). Thus, what spurred on this theology of liberation is to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society freer and more human. On the part of the African church herself, it certainly calls for her active commitment to the struggles of Africans for freedom, justice, and the humanization of the entire continent, what indeed the challenges of liberation theology in the context of African experience are all about. For as a critical reflection on the unjust African condition, African liberation theology calls particularly upon Christians to act, to live out their faith through action, to challenge the oppressive systems in which they found themselves and, above all, to help create a new social order, a new society, which is more equitable, more just, and which ultimately is for the good of all. For this reason, African liberation theologians must toil for a theology for artisans of a new humanity in Africa.

Liberation theology for Africans is likened to the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus Christ himself who stood in the gap. African liberation theology has many faces, this include, political liberation, economic liberation, cultural liberation, feminist theology, environmental liberation theology. The main focus of African liberation theology revolves around three major areas such as African cultural theology known as inculturation, second political theology in the independent African countries and third African feminist theology. All these are interconnected as none can be achieved or discussed adequately without the other.

African cultural theology primarily answers the African's question, what is God saying about our situation of identity dominated, oppressed and exploited by other cultures? On the political front, the question of concern is what is God saying about our situation of being dominated, oppressed and exploited by western world on the geographical level, by the rich on the economic and by the capitalists on the classist level? African feminist theology will be primarily answering the woman's question, 'what is God saying about our situation of being oppressed and exploited by men on account gender difference?' (Frostin 8).

Religious Liberation Theology

No one can truly understand what he or she does not truly know. This principle was greatly endeared to by saint Thomas Aquinas, the eminent catholic theologian of the thirteenth century. If Christianity is to be judged by how it has tried to provide liberating knowledge to African Christians throughout these centuries, the judgment would be rather unfavorable. Africans have been attracted to the Christian faith from its first contact without resistance, begged its missionaries for baptism, tried to live according to its demands but with insufficient knowledge of the new found faith they have embraced. The majority of African Christians observed John Waliggo may be compared to a person who has purchased a new bicycle in adult age and despite the many years of usage, he or she still does not feel comfortable or balanced on it. He or she is afraid of speeding, and manages, purely by chance, to pass through the heavy traffic each day. Others who know it well feel sorry for him/her or simply amused at the strange way he or she rides it (30-31). An expression came to birth in many an African country when comparing Christianity with whatever cannot be understood. It is as impossible to understand as Christianity.

With such an attitude, it is impossible to achieve or let alone march towards religious liberation. The African Christian has been taught what he or she should do to prepare to receive the sacraments, the commandments he must observe, the particular and universal

obligations to his church. Though miserable but portrays a good external attitude in his new religion. But ask how he should behave as a politician, a trader, a businessman, husband or wife, taxi-driver, he may find no answer from the catechism he was taught to learn by heart or from the instructions he continues to attend on Sundays and other special days. He may be highly educated but still ask a priest; “how much does one sacrifice of the Mass cost? What do I do when my Muslim cousin is going to marry? How do I educate my young nephew, a protestant, who is living with us? I wish to be active in politics, is it allowed for members of our church?”

Without mature Christian catechesis, African Christians cannot be truly religiously liberated. Ignorance is one of the fundamental aspects of enslavement. Wherever it is found, it militates against liberation. To work for religious liberation means fundamentally revising our Christian catechesis or religious instruction so that it aims at encouraging Christian maturity. African Christians ought to know all the essentials of their faith and to apply it in their daily lives. They need to be encouraged to be critical in understanding that faith which they embraced. The need to move from simply what is commanded or prohibited by Christianity to grasp the life Christianity of a fear of sin and of hell to a Christianity of love, of truth, of a total life of conformity to Christ (Walligo 31). Until the religious education given becomes truly liberative, we should not expect African Christians to be fully liberated by Christianity.

Economic Liberation Theology

African countries are nowhere to be found in the global market economy. The globalization of economy today puts the African countries in the slow lane track. Hence, they remain beggars among the continents of the world. The institutions that are developing economy are not developed, rather they are been looted out, and most African countries keep borrowing for consumption instead of production. World economic policies do not favour the African trade. This has contributed enormously to the impoverishment and underdevelopment of Africa. Africa is exploited by their colonizers who take most of their crude oil and agricultural products at a giveaway price only to sell them back to Africa at a high price. Oborji rightly observed that the present world economy manipulates prices of the raw materials from the African countries and, through the protectionist policies of the industrialized countries, blocks the inflow of manufactured goods from the developing countries (140). What an unfortunate scenario. Due to serious crises in African economies, African countries are variously referred to as underdeveloped, developing or less-developed countries. The above reality means that African economy is caged and in bondage, and this is expressed by Adedeji that the African economy has meaning only to the extent it is allowed to be controlled by the

former colonial masters. With this economic system, Africa can never develop fully like other great countries of the world (198).

Saying that Africa is currently in an economic crisis is probably a great understatement. Basic infrastructure in most African countries is dilapidated, economic growth is minimal, access to the basics like food, health and education is sparse and expensive, inflation, arid areas are encroaching into previously arable land, and so on and so forth. The list is enormous. With all these happening, while the continent is deeply entrenched in debt to the developed Western countries, much of which was acquired to fight the economic hardships but have obviously failed to make any marked improvement in the situation. Harold Nyikal observed that there are many arguments as to the cause of the current economic crisis in Africa from political instability, to underdeveloped human resources, to the oil crisis of the 1973-4, to increased government spending after the colonial period, to inheritance of poor colonial economic systems and trade practices which were set up on purpose to serve as source and sink to the “mother” country rather than serve the people, to the sole dependence on primary industries that is failure to diversify, and many more (3-4). All these points are to a great extent valid, but how the situation has been handled has resulted more to maintaining the status quo or worsening the situation altogether as the rest of the world looked on if not directly benefited. Though the title of my paper befits a much broader perspective on the economic crisis in Africa, my focus is primarily on the debt problem. In my opinion the African debt problem is the biggest hindrance to any possible solutions to the overall economic crisis. This is ironic because the purpose of the loans in the first place was to help alleviate economic hardships in the receiving countries. Most African countries were in debt almost as soon as they gained independence. The amount of debt has been constantly rising since then. Currently African governments spend huge chunks of their annual revenue just to service loans, money that could go quite a distance in developing their economies.

For Bénézet Bujo, the main problem is ‘the mass poverty of Africa (53). Although some church leaders have spoken out on behalf of the poor, “it must be said that the church of Africa has been a silent church”. Jean-Marc Éla supports Bujo’s call for economic liberation (36). The fact is that colonial Christian churches, being too concerned with spiritual matters, neglected earthly matters and hence failed to pay attention to social conditions that produce material poverty. African liberation theologians saw the colonial churches' sole concentration on eschatological dimension as leading the colonial churches to a theological paralysis and a theological escapism that avoided the concrete experiences of material poverty of the African converts. For this reason, as Mveng observes the phenomenon of poverty was poorly studied by the colonial churches, if it was studied at all (Gibellini 154). African liberation theologians must see to it that this situation is

challenged and had changed in the postcolonial context. They recognize that in the postcolonial context, at the moment when people are seeking to re-read the bible in terms of actual experience, the challenges of poverty and oppression suddenly provide a *locus* where the churches can work to understand themselves and their mission. As Jean-Marc Ela says, “a church is not yet authentically rooted in a people unless it seeks to establish justice amidst that people and perform the works of that justice” (Gibellini 155).

Poverty reduction theology is another priority in African Theology that creates hope among the poor African Christians, although it is usually neglected in the academic publications. Oftentimes, poverty reduction theology is left to African evangelicals. Since poverty reduction is so dominant in African Pentecostal preaching, it needs to be treated as a new priority in African Christian theology. It is defined as the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth, and that they can obtain these blessings through faith and the “sowing of seeds” through the faithful payments of tithes, first fruits, and love offerings. This is a misleading approach to poverty reduction. A theology that reduces poverty in Africa is a contextualized theology of modern African context. Therefore, this is a theology that is from within Africa with its social and economic problems that has bedeviled the African communities like corruption, political rivalries, and ethnicity. Tokunboh Adeyemo says that Africa is an enigma, which is something hard to understand or explain. He stated that when one considers all the resources available in Africa, such as land, natural and cultivated vegetation, animals, water systems, minerals, the various sources of energy, and above all the beautiful people and their spirituality, one is stunned to learn about the poverty in Africa (31).

Poverty reduction is the common talk both for the Church as well as the political leadership in Africa. It creates a common ground between the political arena and the evangelical arena. It believes in the power of prayer and the possibility of miracles to reduce poverty, unemployment, and barrenness. It emphasizes the power of Jesus Christ to provide the daily needs of individuals. It also has the power of victory that overcomes evil spiritual powers that result to poverty in the African societies. Poverty eradication theology assumes that every Christian has a right to be liberated from poverty. It assumes that God will make every Christian rich at their own time; Christians are only expected to do the right things while they leave the rest to God (Waweru 221).

In contrast to early missionary theology of heaven, African Theology is now much more interested in this world. Contemporary African Theology has prioritized poverty reduction by putting the Gospel into the modern context of poverty, suffering, unemployment, and disease eradication. African poverty reduction theology argues that Jesus Christ is the answer to these problems, but hard work must accompany the gospel (Mugambi 36). It is

thus necessary to believe that faith in Jesus is not only for one's personal salvation, but also for living a good life here on earth. Faith in Jesus will guarantee eternal life in heaven and prosperity here on earth. It will provide solutions to our problems on this earth when we examine our common issues with right tools of social analysis.

Despite the relative wealth and prosperity that are part of our contemporary world, there are billions of people in the world for whom poverty is not merely an academic notion but an existential reality. According to Smith, we live in a relatively affluent era in comparison with the past. The majority of those who live in poverty live in the developing world. It does not matter how hard the poor work or what they do to escape from poverty, it remains a trap from which it is difficult to extricate themselves, though, not necessarily impossible (1). This poverty is entrenched in the socio-economic and political structures of the world. Smith sees poverty as a trap when he says: "Poverty is a cruel trap. For many of the unfortunate people who are ensnared in this painful leg-hold, escape on their own can be but impossible" (Smith 157). This poverty trap – which is often referred to as "structural poverty" – is much more than just lack of income. Instead the very conditions of poverty make it likely that poverty will even continue tomorrow (Terreblanch 253).

Therefore, if Christians in Africa are to be organized in terms of the society in which they live, then, African liberation theologians must advance the following views. First, African churches cannot ignore the situations of dependency and economic practices imposed on Africans by Western Europe and America. Second, African churches have the duty of evaluating the role of economic systems in the formation of society and the perpetuation of poverty. Third, African churches have to take account of the exploitation of the peasantry and popular masses as cheap labour that helps only the elite to prosper. This means that African liberation theologians must call on the churches not to stand aside but to encourage and help the poor when they begin to demand a just society. For this Nyerere, writing about the Catholic Church, maintains that the "Church, through its members, should be leading the attack on any organization, or any economic, social, or political structure that oppresses men and women and which denies them the right and power to live as sons of a loving God" (Parrat 118).

Further, Nyerere argues that the relevance of the Christian churches in the postcolonial context goes along with the expression of God's love for man by involvement and leadership in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organizations which condemn men and women to poverty, humiliation and degradation. Failure to do this, then, the churches will become identified with injustice and persecution (Parrat 11). When this happens, Nyerere observes that one of two scenarios are inevitable. At best, the churches will become irrelevant to man and woman and the Christian religion will

degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted by the fearful. At worst, the Christian churches will die- and humanly speaking, deserve to die: because they will then serve no purpose comprehensible to modern man and woman" in his/her pursuit of social justice (Parrat III).

Political Liberation Theology

God is not responsible for the oppression and exploitation of black people. Blacks are not poor and oppressed by accident or by divine design. Instead they are made poor, powerless and oppressed by the rich and socio-politically powerful whites and African elites. To this assertion, Maimela goes on to argue that:

It is in fact human beings and not gods, who are the creators of exploitative structures, it was then just a matter of time before modern historical consciousness would reach the momentous conclusion, namely some people are oppressed and suffer because they have been denied by the ruling elite the right to become architects of their own destiny. In other words, what is new in this situation is the awareness by oppressed groups and individuals that they are not poor by accident or on account of laziness on their part, but rather they are made poor and dependent by their human oppressors who deny them a voice in the shaping of human society and history (55).

To attend the above view, Nigeria needs statesmen and women of unquestionable character to lead in the direction of transparency and accountability.

Politically, African countries have not found their feet, though they have gotten their independence. Most of the African countries are still being ruled indirectly by strong powers that colonized them. According to Igboamalu, one of the major problems or crises of the African countries and other developing countries, with regard to the issue of global governance, is the tendency of the West and America or the colonizers to impose their socio-cultural and political standards and values, which they want, on the rest of the world. Consequently, Africa is always suppressed

politically, without these super powers remembering that we have our own ideas of government before their advent (67). This led to the enthronement of puppet leaders and presidents who would always obey the strong powers that put them in office. Hence, Achebe rightly observed that leadership remains the problem of African countries. This continues to make African countries to be political slaves to most nations in the world (86). This affirms Oborji claim that "the newly independent African states were modeled politically and economically on the nations which had colonized them" (34). Again, Dudley pointed out that the constitution handed over to the new nations was not founded

on African cultural values, environment or philosophy. By implication, the independence lacked the ingredients of its new nations; this accounts for political instability in most of the African nations. This political instability led to several military coups d' etat in Africa (57). This well-known military rule in Africa helped in reducing Africa to abject poverty.

Slavery and colonization were great blows to the African continent, judging from all aspects of African lives. This in particular perpetuated poverty in Africa today. African countries gradually became poor with the conquest of African nations. African states were divided at the Berlin conference, for self-interest and exploitation. Offiong asserted that:

The conference produced the Berlin act, an instrument to which the major European powers were signatories. It had as its aims those of fostering the development of trade and civilization... the moral and material wellbeing of the native populations. This was nonsensical because in all their undertakings, their interests came first, and all was designed to enhance the exploitation of the people (9).

It is well known that the conquest and occupation of the continent of Africa by Europeans spanned four centuries. During these centuries, Africans were dominated, exploited. This led to the formulation of colonial policies and disorganization of the traditional pattern of societal organization in Africa. This makes African countries to be stooges to the stronger countries of the world. These situations above, in a nut shell, show the image of bondage in Africa which has held the African people hostage for centuries. The African continent has been promised liberation even by her colonizers, through many ways, out of their poverty, political instability and underdevelopment, yet things keep on becoming worse and backward when compared to this age of globalization.

Conclusion

As a local church treading the path of liberation in the foot prints of Christ, man's liberator per excellence, the African church must develop a new sense of mission and responsibility towards the increasing poor and marginalized on the continent. The poor cannot rarely be helped by mere charity, what Friere would call false generosity as distinct from true generosity. The former ultimately begets more poverty, dependence, and powerlessness, were-as true generosity lies in striving so that these hands, whether of individuals or entire peoples need to be extended less and less in supplications, so that more and more they become human hands which work, and transform the world. Liberation theology is the product of awareness that oppression and exploitation of the less privileged people are man-made, sinful, and therefore contradicts everything the gospel message stands for. Therefore, anything which claims to be good news for all but

fails to address itself squarely to those conditions cannot be taken seriously by the oppressed. Until the good news takes a concrete form and fight against all forms of impoverishment and exploitation as going against God's will, the reign of God which is the reign of justice, will never be ushered in, and as long as the reign of justice is deferred, the poor, who are always the helpless victims of injustice, will continue to question the authenticity and relevance of the good news.

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