

**THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN THEOLOGY IN ADDRESSING THE RELIGIOUS
WORLD VIEWS OF THE AFRICANS**

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Abstract

The thrust of this study is to portray the relevance of African theology in addressing the problems of Africans. The basic persistent trait of African societies is the importance of religion embedded in its theology. It is like a shaft of light across the entire spectrum of African existence. The purpose of this study is to state the relevance of African theology in addressing the issues of the African religious world view. This religious worldviews include marriage, farming, career choices even such as mundane matters as travelling. The problem of this study is that African theology is often times referred to as an abstract thinking and as such considered irrelevant by some group of intellectuals. This study has therefore proven that African theology is very much productive and relevant to the very existence of the Africans and should not be merely dismissed as an abstraction. The findings showed that African theology has been controlled exclusively by the West. Theological teaching materials like textbooks, manuals, philosophy, and methodology of African theology has been of Western orientation. This is why the theology has not clearly featured the real issues of the African life, and that is what this article has attempted to solve. This study however recommends that African theology must seriously address the religious worldview of the Africans. The methods of approach adopted for this study include; historical and phenomenological methods. The study concluded that African Christian Theology is the most suitable in understanding and analyzing the African religious worldview.

Introduction

The concept of African theology raises some skeptical questions and arguments whenever it is raised. It is however these skepticism and suspicion that this study intends to clarify. One of the conceptions that this study intends to clarify is that the import of African theology is not a rejection of anything that has to do with the West, Colonialism, and economic imperialism of the European masters as some people wrongly insinuates. African theology as presented in this study is not a reactionary or a hostile theology to any theology developed in the West. This study however, applied the concept of African theology to the African life. This is a theology that is truly Christian and truly African in expression. Thus, this research is conducted to address questions that arise from the African context and to apply the word of God to them. However, it is critical to remember that an African theology does not stand alone but is part of the larger context of the Christian story. God's dealing with humankind began at creation and have continued to the present day in the context of the universal church of Christ (Kunhiyop, 2012). This is however the thrust of every theological postulations

including African theology. Any theology that does not take into cognizance of God's Omnipotent, creative and authoritative force, cannot be considered a theology. It is however on the standpoint of this religious paradigm that African theology is deeply rooted on.

Nigeria, being a part of the African continent, equally shares in this high religious consciousness. The Nigerian reality is rooted in this religious paradigm as it is expressed in the complexity of ritual and symbols which together pervade the entire field of human existence. African theology as it were, is rooted at the core of the personality of the Nigerians and their other African counterparts. It is a theology that clings to life and illuminates from all angles and Africans have used its power to create mansions of devotion and community (Madu, 1997). The theology influences and determines the life styles of the Africans generally. Both the governments and the individuals had in various ways in the past recognized the important influence that this theology has in the lives of the people. This theology has continued to act as active moral and spiritual-development resource. The theology has also molded the consciousness of the Africans in their interpersonal and human relations. This is because according to Waje (2010), the African church is composed largely of the people who come out of the African religious background. Their culture, history, worldview and spiritual aspirations cannot be taken away from them. These impinge upon their daily life and experience of the Christian faith.

Based on the above background, would this research work take a further step to explore the meaning of African theology and how it addresses the problem of the Africans. For a detailed and analytical study, this work will apply the Nigerian perspective as a case study of African cosmology. The study will specifically give answers to the following questions:

- What is African theology?
- What are the assumptive world views that undergird African theology?
- What is the goal of African theology to the Africans in the Nigerian perspective?

It is hoped that answers to these questions will further enable the researcher to appraise the essential religious themes that are subsumed in African theology. The need for this study is to enlighten Africans particularly the Nigerians on the meaning and the relevance of African theology. This knowledge will help the different religious adherents, especially the Christians to understand and appreciate the beauty of African heritage and to incorporate same in religious worship. The work only covers some basic concepts involved in African theology in the Nigerian perspective. It is more or less an introductory study to the fundamentals of African theology and not much detail are given.

What is Theology?

The root meaning of theology is the study of God. The word was originally used by ancient Greek poets to refer to myths about pagan gods, but in the second century AD Clement Alexandria used it when speaking of the true knowledge of God. In the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo in North Africa used the term to refer to the study of temporal rather than eternal matters. He did not see these as separate but as complementary. It was rather in the twelfth century that theology gained a more technical meaning. Abelard (1995) taught that theology was a sacred learning as a whole, as distinguished from secular disciplines such as the sciences.

In more specific terms, theology deals with how we understand God and his revelation to his creation. While it is concerned with matters of faith and with eternal happiness as our ultimate goal, it is also a self-conscious scholarly enterprise of understanding. However, African theology is embedded in its worldview which is essentially demonstrated in their value systems, such as their philosophy of life, social conduct and morality, folklores, myths, rites and rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and so on. The above views underscore the comprehensive nature of African theology as the totality of African's assumptions about God. Thus African theology can be said to give a sense of direction and purpose to African existence as well as their sub-conscious guide through life. In other words, it is the complex of Africans beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, the nature, structure, organization and interaction of beings in the universe with particular reference to man. The emphasis here is on the element of interaction and connectedness which underpins the African theology. Having laid the foundation on the essence of African theology, let us now delve into the factors that led to the emergence of African theology.

The Features of African Theology

It must be recalled that before the advent of Christianity in the shores of Africa, Africans had developed a distinct and rich theology about the existence of God. Achebe (1997) notes that African theology is embedded in their myths, proverbs, metaphors, customs and taboos. For example, the myth of creation ascribes the creative activity to *Chukwu/Chineke* (God creates, great God). Accordingly, *Chukwu* is said to be the creator of things visible and things not visible. From this perspective, an insight is gained as to the structure of the universe and God as the Supreme Being over the universe. Ejizu (1982) notes that *Eluigwe* (the sky above) is the abode of the Supreme Being (*Chukwu* or *Chineke*) and such major divinities like *Amadioha* (god of thunder) and *Anyanwu* (god of light). The earth is the home of the earth goddess *Ala*, minor deities, nature deities and man, while the ancestors and myriads of spirit-forces, (good and evil) inhabit the world. There is confusion here as to which beings inhabit the underworld. However, this confusion can be allayed when we realize the fact that there is mutual interaction of beings in African/Igbo underworld. The ancestors for example, who inhabit the underworld, can at times visit their families in the world of men. Even man can be transformed to visit the land of the dead. The nature gods inhabit the earth but they belong to the group of invincible beings. All these beings according to Igbo ontology occupy hierarchical ranks according to their vital force or rank (Madu, 1997).

The spiritual beings rank before the mortal man, who must live a life of balance with the spiritual beings in order to survive. Thus, the spiritual beings together with man and the other elements are in continuous and intimate relationship. Only when these beings live in harmonious relationship will cosmic harmony be realized. Any break of relationship in any other spheres, affects the entire system adversely. Since man is at the lowest level of the ontological rank, man is subordinated to the higher beings who are spiritual. They provide security and fortunes to man, and man dare not annoy them without appropriate punishment from the gods. This underscores the Igbo man's unalloyed respect and loyalty to the spirits. The spirits interfere in their daily lives, and the Igbo people cannot afford to push them aside. To remain in balance with the spiritual beings, he must relate well with his neighbours. In fact, man is the bridge between the spiritual beings and other cosmic elements.

In spite of the colonial experience of depersonalization and cultural invasion, the African/Igbo theology has kept this vitality of faith and belief system in language, dance, music, and literature. This theological vitality is the support of the African struggle for total emancipation and liberation. Incidentally, the white church later imported into Africa a theology developed with a methodology, a worldview, and a conception of humanity using western styles. These western categories of racial, political, economic, religious, social, and cultural domination could not offer the Africans the divine salvation they needed for their own cultural values, customs, and the like. Consequently, the African theology was fully developed to address the issues of African existence. In more specific terms, below are the features of African theology:

- The inherent values in the African traditional religions were understood as the preparation for the gospel.
- A critical theology which is rooted in the Bible, open to African realities, and dialogue with non-African theologies.
- Black theology in South Africa, which takes into consideration the experiences of oppression and struggle for liberation from the biblical faith as expressed in African language and categories as well as from the experiences and reflections of black North Americans.
- The African theology of decolonization which is a reflection of Psalm 68:31 that created the theology of Ethiopianism.

The Sources of African Theology

African theology is shaped by at least four factors; Bible and Christian heritage, African anthropology, African, traditional religions, and African independent churches (Nmah, 2012).

The Bible and Christian Heritage: the Bible is the main source of the African theology since it is the primary witness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This is because of the fact that every theology emanates from the Scripture. Therefore, for African theology to retain its Christian identity, it must reflect of the scripture. In the Scripture, God unveiled himself and His will to his creation. Without this, any theology would be purely speculative, with no sure foundation. God's revelation is given in two forms. Though, God also revealed himself through history, nature and the human conscience, but He made a special revelation of himself in the Holy Scriptures. Both forms of revelation are important in theology, but the Bible has the dominant, authoritative, judging and evaluative role.

African Anthropology/cosmology

Life for the Africans is a continuum. There is no break or annihilation. There is unity and continuity between the destiny of human persons and the destiny of the cosmos. African anthropology and cosmology are optimistic for the fact that they believe that the victory of life is in the cosmos. Therefore, the salvation of the human person in African theology is the salvation of the universe. Ejizu (1982) summarized African cosmology as one which holds a unified view of reality. This is understandable under the backdrop that all the spheres of Igbo cosmic structure and their inhabitants are in continuous interaction. They act as in a web-like manner, for whatever affects one sphere affects the others too. Man is at the centre of everything but he is not alone. He relies on the patronage of the gods and his neighbours. This brings out the community of consciousness among the Africans.

Moreover, African cosmology upholds that life is supreme, and everything is done to keep it on. Thus, sickness diminishes life and so its cause must be diagnosed through divination and appropriate measures to restore life. Thus, man wants to live long and keep in touch positively with the spiritual powers who, as it were, guarantee his security and continued existence. Childlessness is abhorred and must be guarded against as childlessness implies extinction of a lineage, which must be resisted by marrying a second wife. Under the above perspectives, the Africans find answers to their day to day existential problems. They believe that God is the sole creator and master of the world. That God as the Supreme Being is distinct from His creatures. However, the relationship between God and man, the situation of the supersensible world, the relationship between God and the divinities, the human suffering, the fall of man, the appearance of death, and other things that defy empirical explanation.

African Traditional Religions

For the Africans, the traditional religions are a major source of knowing God. For a sound African Christian theology and spirituality, the beliefs and practices of the traditional religions have to be widened into African Christian theology. African traditional religion has no written scriptures, founders and reformers. Its traditional sources of information are designated as oral traditions as Idowu (1973) has pointed out that the said oral traditions are the Africans only means of knowing about the universe and the super sensible world, what they think and believe about the relationship between the two. The oral sources include myths, proverbs, meanings attached to names, ordinary day speech, pithy sayings, liturgy, songs and dances. Douglas in Ugwu (1999) defines myths as traditional stories of unknown origin handed down from earliest times. Myths as opposed to legends deal paramountly with the gods. It is a way of explaining certain things about the created order and about the supersensible world. We have the myths telling of the creation of the world, the original state of man. Such myths are kept in memory and are passed on by word of mouth from one generation to another (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

Proverbs as one of the oral sources of African traditional religion are short wise sayings that contain truths about life. They are well known phrases or sentences that give advice or imply something that is generally true. African daily speeches are full of proverbs, which reveal a lot about African religious beliefs, especially ideas about God. From proverbs, we learn a lot about God and his attributes as well as the worldview of the Africans. Proverbs are reliable sources of information on African traditional religion because of the regularity of their application and usage in daily life dealings. Proverbs are used to settle quarrels, to teach people, warn implicitly against evil conduct or an impending doom, to encourage people, to show that certain things are supposed to happen under certain circumstances, and to show man's state of helplessness in a mysterious world.

Relevant information is also gathered about African religion through analyzing the numerous names and attributes of the Supreme Being. Names reveal a lot about the people's beliefs and aspirations with regard to the unseen world. Africans attach great importance to names. Names are not just abstract terms but are loaded with meanings and symbolic importations. The names given to people and places clearly reflect the importance of names in African religion. Names convey sentiments of truth, faith in deity, belief in and about divinities and the supersensible world, assurances and hopes of man.

Consequent upon the above, Africans are religious in what they say. Whatever they do or say in one way or the other reflects a lot about their belief in God. For instance, in greetings, Africans talk about God. One asked about his family always reply thus, “by God’s grace they are well”. In everyday conversation, one always hears people say, “I thank God”, “by the will of God”, “if God permits”, “we thank God”. These sayings, which are constantly used, reveal much about the Africans notion about God. Most essentially, Africans love songs and dances much that in almost all situations they find succor and solace in songs and dances. Traditional songs and dances reflect different situations in life such as traditional wedding, naming ceremony, funeral, wrestling, farming and so on. In dancing to the rhythm of the songs, religious feelings are expressed.

African Independent Churches

It could be recounted that African independent churches have evolved African theology from their type of worship, organization, and community life that are rooted in African culture which touch the daily life of the people. African independent churches emerged as a struggle for transformation of socio-economic systems, racism, sexism, and other forms of economic, political, social, and cultural oppressions, are all to be taken seriously as sources for theology. They adapted to the African way of life in order to fit into the African world milieu. The African independent churches as used by Turner (1978) is a general term for the phenomena in Africa which embraced a bewildering variety of aladuras, separatist sects, post-Christian movements, Pentecostal or spiritual churches as well as the great range of special terms or taxonomies coined by anthropologists since Linton’s nativistic religions of the 1940s. These independent churches are new forms of movement that are traditional or primal religions, distinct from the older or parent churches. They tend to counter certain forms, inadequacies or ideas of the older parent churches. Movements of this type includes, the Africanized form of the Watchtower Movement in Central Africa (1907), the Deima church of Ivory Coast since 1922, the Hereto Church of Zambia (1955) and the Catholic background Church of the Sacred Heart in Zambia(1956)(Turner,1978). Apart from Africanizing and indigenizing the church, the independent churches have also moved towards political independence over the whole Africa. In order wards, they are movements made towards political independence of the state as well spiritual independence of the church.

Their patriotic and religious campaigns, embedded in the African theology resemble those of the ancient nabism in Israel. They developed and applied African theology to champion the liberty and freedom of the oppressed Africans. An example is the Ngunguzists of the early phase of the Kimbanguist movement known for their Holy-war mongering (Ndiokwere, 1995). Furthermore, the national church of Nigeria and other similar churches started the nationalism in the churches. They have their leaders mainly black and also propagate black philosophy of concept. At times, these independent church movements are referred to as a form of proto-nationalism (Hayward, 1963). However, African independent churches have not provided new national or state religions, but they claimed that their leaders themselves serve pseudo-religious purposes, sometimes they are given messianic status. People like Nkrumah, Azikiwe, Banda, Kenyata, Lumunba share in their older divine status.

Most independent church movements in Africa have adopted an episcopalian system of government. However, whereas the older Episcopalian churches have councils or synods and formal structures in place to guide in matters of doctrine, liturgy and administration, in

independent churches, power usually resides in the founder. This founder is referred to as general overseer, superintendent or bishop and tends to retain power until he or she dies (Kunhiyop, 2012). Most independent churches claim that the spirit guides the founder, particularly in regard to liturgy and preaching, and so they rely solely on the founder in matters of faith, doctrine and sometimes even administration. The founder directs the church according to how he or she feels led, often in a dictatorial fashion.

Ways that African Theology Addressed the Problems of the Africans

African theology has in many ways met the demands of the Africans in prosperity, health and success in their life endeavours. The theology speaks to Africans in the accent they understand. According to Idowu (1978), the theology has taken the cognizance of the cultural background of the society rather relating the knowledge of God in strange and foreign cultures. The nationalists, especially the African church leaders, created African theology that has cultural nationalists dimension. That is to say that Africans who are Christians can now interpret the gospel within the context of their culture such as in music, art and dance. Idowu in consonance with this agrees that Christ will be real to Nigerians when the church in the country develops a distinctive theology in consequence of their own personal knowledge of God and a personal appropriation of the leadership of Christ (Idowu, 1965).

In situations where many Africans had been regarded or had regarded themselves as nobodies, the African theology has given them sense of belonging. Their individual gifts and talents are now recognized and used for their personal benefits and the benefits of others. The theology gives the Africans absolute confidence and security in their daily activities. It affords them the insight into the realm of the supra-mundane, making the world to realize that life has meaning, a meaning which can be found in the context of African worldview. This is so because the Western theologies have often ignored the African context, and so African theologians have felt the need to express the Christian faith in a way that is deeply rooted in their own cultures and expressed in their own language. Thus Efoe Julien Penoukou seeks to root it in the cultural context of his own *Ewe-Mina* ethnic group in Togo and Benin. They conceive of reality “as a continuous passage from life to death and from death to life”, and so Penoukou’s Christology focuses on death and resurrection of Jesus. So does that of Kwesi Dickson of Ghana, Nyamiti of Tanzania who roots his Christology in the African world view and focused on the African understanding of what it means to be human, and incarnation as the highest expression of faith (Kunhiyop, 2012).

Other theologians who identify Christ’s role in terms of familiar African understanding include, Harry Sawyer of Sierra Leone who presented Christ as being like the African Elder brother. He maintained that Christ is the supreme head of African family. Another was J.S. Pobee from Ghana who sought to understand how Akan tradition focuses on God as their great ancestor. A. T. Sanon from Burkina Faso also presented Jesus as the Head and Master of Akan initiation and interpreted the various stages of Jesus’ role as Healer in the light of the Africans understanding of initiation. CeceKolie on his part sees Jesus’ role as Healer in the light of Africa’s soothsaying and divination. Benezet Bujo focuses on the concept of Jesus as the proto-ancestor, the unique ancestor, the source of life and highest model of ancestorship (Nmah, 2012).

Consequently, South Africa's struggle against apartheid led theologians such as Laurenti Magesa from East Africa to develop the theme of Christ as the liberator, under the influence of South American liberation theology. They made several positive impacts in their efforts to give insight into the African cosmology and worldviews with the hope of providing relevant language with which to communicate theology. For example, words like ancestor, healer, diviner, elder brother, guest, and master initiator have profound meanings in Africa, and capturing these words for the Christian religion is very important for the establishment of Christianity on the continent. Translation of the biblical worldview into an African Christian worldview helps to make Christianity truly African. It also ensures that the questions that African Christians struggle with are seriously discussed.

Fundamentally, the theology is making sense of the word of God. It emphasizes the understanding of God from African perspective, a theology in which humanity is at the centre of the universe. The source of the theology thereby being from human experience and beliefs. A situation where the African worldview is basis from which to judge the meaning of the scripture. Africans experiences of God can be compared to the experiences of God's people in the Old and New Testaments. Consequently, all insights obtained from the African worldview are subjected to the scrutiny of the scriptures. The theology rigorously judged the African way of life in such a way that it interacted with the scriptures and apply them to the local context. This is because of the fact that God has revealed himself to man by communicating in human language, therefore our beliefs and practices must be based on a proper understanding of this divine communication.

African theology is expressed in categories of thought, which arise out of the philosophy of the African people which is meant to remedy and rehabilitate Africa's rich cultural heritage and religious consciousness. It is therefore hoped that there will be a possibility of African traditional religion making contribution to Christian theology. This is based on the fact that theology is a function of the church and no church exists without a theology. In propagation of the gospel, it involves the use of certain images and symbols, which are derived from the existing cultural and religious traditions of the hearers. Some of these symbols that emerged may be misleading and therefore need continual examination of the church's proclamation to rid them of misleading symbols and to look for others that will transmit the accurate gospel message. This is the task and goal of African theology.

Conclusion

Different cultures have different ways of ordering their world. Each mode is a lens through which man, in a given culture views his world. Each culture lens, enables it to conceive and understand God in its own peculiarity. However, this constitutes the goal of African theology as an attempt by Christians in Africa to systematically reflect God's revelation of Himself through Jesus Christ in the philosophy of the African people. It can also be seen as an attempt to translate the message of Jesus Christ through thought forms that Africa will find relevant and meaningful. However, culture as people's way of life means different things to different people and it is an interest of African theologians to communicate the message of Christ in African culture. In every culture to which the gospel comes there are men who hail Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspirations, the perfecter of its true faith, and the source of its holiest spirit. The people feel, interpret and understand Christ through their culture. Hence, the major significance of African theology is that it interprets

Christ wholly in cultural terms and tends to eliminate all sense of tension between him and social belief or custom. Indeed, man's personality, the way he speaks, dresses or his language is highly controlled and determined by societal culture. If a man behaves contrary to his culture, he loses his identity among his people. This is because man is identified by his ethnical cultural values, norms, beliefs and practices which give him a sense of belonging. However, the goal of African theology is that it seeks to identify the cultural identity of the African people and in order to achieve this, will advocate, and exalt, African culture, religion, and philosophy, to address the problems of the Africans.

Finally, it is expedient that one must distinguish the message of the scripture (doctrinal matter which God wants to convey to the salvation community) from their instrumental statements used to convey it. While the former demands divine veracity, the latter has truthfulness only in so far as falsehood in them would vitiate or lessen the full communication of the Bible message. What this implies is that man finds his vertical dimension, fulfillment, self-realization and actualization in God by the truths of the Bible and the relevance of the culture.

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