

**BEYOND AFRICAN HERITAGE AND IDENTITY: THE INDISPENSABLE
OBLIGATION OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP FOR WELL-
BEING**

Nora K. Nonterah, PhD* & Kenneth Oppong**

ABSTRACT

The negative and destructive appraisal of Africa and its people by the early European missionaries and explorers moved Africans to approach Christian scholarship as a corrective response to who the African is. Hence, the pioneers of African Christian Theology focused on African culture and identity. The emphasis on this identity and cultural heritage seems to be prolonged and threatens the sight of the reality of the continent and the indispensable role of Christianity in response. This paper proposes that African Christian Theology should drive beyond the consideration of African cultural heritage and identity

Keywords: African Christian Theology, Challenges, Africa, Consideration

INTRODUCTION

Christianity came to sub-Saharan Africa through the activities of Western missionaries and explorers who perceived Africans as people living on a dark continent with no religion (Bediako, 1992), thus painting a picture of the African as uncivilized with complexities of uninformed superstitions. This presented two problems to African Christianity. Firstly, a discontinuity from its historical/indigenous encounter with God. This is because the religious expressions of the indigenous people of sub-Saharan Africa received “relentless assault and bastardization” (Ndemanu, 2018, p. 71). Many cultural practices and traditions were, therefore, referred to as heathen, fetish, and pagan, and were forbidden by missionaries and those who followed the Christian faith (Kateko, 1984). It led to the treatment of African culture and religion as either harmful or valueless (Bediako, 1992). Thus, it meant that for one to be a Christian and civilized, one had to disassociate from religious understanding and ways of being an African – African culture. Secondly, Christianity was packaged in western cultural ‘garments’. Early missionaries gave African Christians a totally Western cultural package that sought to replace in total, any form of already existing cultural elements of the people that could crib into the faith (Ferdinando, 2007). Thus, the culture, mentality and way of being of the European missionaries characterized the message of Jesus Christ that was introduced to most Africans (Obielosi and Ani, 2017). From this backdrop, the Christian faith

was presented to the Africans as one that opposes their beliefs, traditions, religious expressions and other cultural practices. This presented a situation of crisis of identity for African Christians.

African Christians, especially, within the context of the struggle for independence, saw the need to query and interrogate this negative and destructive appraisal of Africa and its indigenous knowledge of God (Wagenaar, 1999). This gave birth to scholarly works, in the early 1960s, by indigenous Africans on African Christianity and African theology culminating in what is usually called African Christian Theology (Bediako, 1992). These writers sought to find the interface between Christianity and African indigenous worldview. Thus, for such scholars like Samuel Mbiti, and Kwame Bediako etc, the agenda of shaping Christianity in Africa by “adapting and using African concepts and ideas” (Waweru, 2018, p. 215) was the focus. Thus, major among other things their scholarship focused mainly on the discourse surrounding cultural heritage and African identity. That is, inculturation and how Africans can ‘recreate’ a Christianity on the continent that appreciates the cultural values unique to the continent.

Nevertheless, the continent is faced with the complex paradox of riches and hopelessness seen in violent conflicts, poverty, insecurity, wars, etc. This makes it relevant to begin to ask new questions in relation to Christianity on the continent. This paper premises that, there is a need for African theology to move beyond the questions of African identity rooted in cultural and indigenous traditional practices to address pertinent and pressing issues that engulf the continent. In this paper, an appraisal of the inspirations, purpose and rationale for such an initial emphasis on culture and African identity, is acknowledged as a pointer/’breath’ on which ‘real’ theologies would have to be developed.

As a qualitative study, the paper employs the descriptive analysis method. Secondary data, that is, scholarly literature is used. Firstly, the work offers an insight into the rationale and importance of the work of pioneers on identity and culture. Secondly, the study uncovers the challenges confronting Africans today and how the wisdom from the pioneer African Scholarship on identity and culture is relevant to the ‘creation’ of theologies that are practical in addressing contemporary issues.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTE ON CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP IN/BY AFRICA

Almost at the same time as the African nations were unshackling themselves from their colonial rule (Gichaara, 2000), African Christians began to rethink their theologies. Most of the champions of these political liberation movements in Africa were staunch Christians who had their formal education in missionary schools and institutions. Some of these champions of the African struggle for independence include Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Sedar Senghor of Guinea, and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (Gichaara, 2000). As such there was a close like-mindedness between African Christian Theology and the movement towards liberating Africans. These African Christian scholars questioned, “why the church in Africa is not more African” (Ogbonnaya, 2015, p. 27). This resulted in the demand for a Christianity that corresponds with African desires for cultural validity and political freedom (Ogbonnaya, pp. 27-28).

The historical event of the need and struggle for independence in Africa meant independence in all aspects of life. Religion is not an exception. Efforts at advancing studies of how African indigenous worldviews as not incompatible with Christianity were started in the mid-20th century and was led by scholars such as Charles Nyamiti, Bolaji Idowu, John Samuel Mbiti, John Pobee, Kwesi Dickson, and Kwame Bediako, Laurenti Magesa, among the pioneers of African Christian Theology.

The religious struggle for independence has been a central theme in major Christian gatherings. To exemplify this religious demand for independence is a reference to the meeting of “All African Conference of Churches (AACC)” in 1963 held in Kampala, Uganda that gave drive to the quest for a Christian theology, that is African (Gichaara, 2000). At the meeting, it became clear to the leaders that in order for AACC to achieve its main objectives, “that is the selfhood of the church in Africa, the African churches’ own theological thinking had to resonate with Africa’s contextual situation” (Gichaara, 2000, p. 77). To achieve the above, in 1996, the first theological consultation was organized by the AACC in Kampala to create an intellectual platform for African theologians to map out a Christian theology for and from Africa considering the traditional beliefs and practices, and cosmology of the Africans (Gichaara, 2000).

In this quest for an African Christian scholarship to envision Christianity on the continent as authentically African, what became “important is the dialogue that is taking place between the Bible and the African culture” (Waweru, 2018, p. 213). This challenged the pioneers of this discourse to prioritise naming and defining their approach as a working guide. This gave birth to the famous African Christian Theology, to mean “offering an analysis and interpretation of the African culture in a dialogue with the Christian faith” (Waweru, 2018, p. 214). An emphasis was put on the culture of a people – African, that should encounter the Christian message without reliance on a foreign culture.

The AACC meeting held in Abuja, Nigeria, in 1969 further stresses this by affirming “a theology that is grounded on the Bible and which speaks to the Africans mindset” (Waweru, 2018, p. 214). This emphasis suggests two important inspirations: firstly, that the indigenous African worldview has elements that support the reception of the message of Christ, consequently, the African worldview is not necessarily incompatible with Christianity. Secondly, the adaptation of foreign philosophy, culture and traditions in understanding and living out Christianity on the continent is perilous to the main mission of the faith, the well-being/salvation of all people. Thus, John Samuel Mbiti, opines that “a theological reflection and expression by African Christians” (Waweru, p. 215) is imperative. With these inspirations, the sole focus of African Christian Theology has been to shape Christianity in Africa by “adapting and using African concepts and ideas” (Waweru, p. 215). From this backdrop, the major focus of ACT assumes two outstanding points of reference, namely, Inculturation and Identity.

Inculturation on one hand focuses on the “process of engagement between the Christian gospel and a particular culture” (Doyle, 2012, p. 13). That is the adaptation of the Christian message to the particular context, in this sense the African cultural heritage. This is not entirely a peculiar adventure for the continent since Christianity has always coexisted with other cultures, right from its inception. To boot, the Christian faith cannot exist by ignoring its socio-cultural origins and forms and this makes it only functional culturally (Kurgat, 2009). In this regard, ensuring that “Christian Theology was able to interact with African culture in a plane ground, by giving African expression to the Christian faith within a theological framework” has been pivotal to African Christian scholarship (Waweru, 2018, p. 216). Thus, producing a kind of assimilation approach of the study of Christianity on the

continent. An approach that seeks to integrate Christianity into the life and culture of African people. They have employed the inculturation of the Christian teaching as one of the schemes to contextualize the Gospel of Christ Jesus. With this approach, emphasis has been laid on “the culture of the African people whom African (Christian) Theology reaches” (Waweru, 2018, p. 216). This has made African heritage a primary influence in the method of carrying out African Christian Theology. In affirmation, Waweru wrote that African Christian Theologians have given priority to the traditional African culture, norms, and values, into which the Gospel was planted, watered, and has germinated. African theology “attempts on the part of African Christians to own their theological reflection, rather than borrow it from others. This in turn means taking seriously their African heritage and identity”(Molyneux, 1988, p. 2).

Identity, on the second-hand centres on African self-hood (Ndubuisi, 2013). It has to do with the uniqueness of the Africans in the world. African identity is what Africans truly are. The reclamation of African identity is a result of the identity crisis caused by slavery, colonialism and racialism (Ndubuisi, 2013). The negative effects of colonial encounters and activities on the continent were denigration of the people, exploitation and rejection of the wisdom and worth of people. Consequently, the identity crisis led African theologians to seek to recover African dignity and worth (Ogbonnaya, 2015). Thus, the genesis of a call for the full liberation or restoration of African identity. African Christian theologians have focused on rectifying the glaring injustices in African societies. This discourse is as relevant as it is for the continent today, has always relied on issues of identity of the people.

The emphasis on cultural heritage and identity that characterizes Christian scholarship on the continent, gives priority to theology that speaks to the real “issues in the African soil which were characterized by colonialism, apartheid, and the cold war” as well as the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Waweru, 2018, p. 218). From this perspective, a strong priority of African Christian Theology has been to “contextualize the Gospel into the context of injustice and poverty within Africa” (Waweru, 2018, p. 219). In other words, Christian scholars have focused on how the gospel message can address the ‘seemingly’ effects of oppression and exploitation by colonial rulers. This kind of emphasis seems to put the solutions to the continent’s problems outside of it. The emphasis itself is not problematic, rather, failure to

harness the purpose and rationale for such an initial stress on culture and African identity to meet the demands of the current realities of the continent.

Africa is confronted with poverty, bad governance, political instabilities, insecurities, and socioeconomic and gender inequalities. This demands that Christian discourse on the continent becomes more pragmatic in order to speak truth to power. It must be a discourse that refocuses on the well-being of everyone. Questioning and demanding existential structural changes is imperative. This demands a certain courage, self-worth and self-determination. The vim and enthusiasm, the inspiration and motivation, the insistence on self-identity and cultural heritage become relevant as the bedrock but not the terminus. In other words, what values/virtues are needed in the contemporary African context to address the needs of her people? What are the areas of concern that can respond to bringing about the well-being of her people? The wisdom from the pioneer's discourse that is relevant to address contemporary issues is the pristine value of *ubuntu*.

TOWARDS A VIRTUE-UBUNTU ETHICS AND THEOLOGY: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Theologizing in modus that makes meaning to the continent is to make the Gospel of Jesus relevant to the Africans in their context, and situations. Against this backdrop, the task of Christian scholarship for Africa today is more imperative and demanding. This is because the Christian message on the continent can no longer concern itself entirely with the pertinent issues of inculturation, and identity. Rather, the claims/strides made in the consideration of African culture and identity serve as the spine to courageously speak truth to power as it relates to the felt needs of the African people. A theology becomes meaningful only when it addresses the present needs of the people. This requires that we rely on the wisdom of Ubuntu as an invitation to renewed mindset that is African and that concentrates on the well-being of everyone.

The understanding of the philosophy of Ubuntu is pivotal for building mindsets, and character and making values relevant/practised in real-life situations. In this regard, Virtue ethics, an old philosophical theory directs that moral character can be acquired over time through habitual action and practice. The theory is crucial for addressing a variety of ethical

issues since morality and virtue offer the knowledge required for applying rules in specific circumstances (Küçükuysal, Bahadır and Beyhan, 2011). Thus, virtue ethics is an advocate of good conduct/excellence. From this backdrop, one could say that human behaviour is relevant to human flourishing. This is because values that do not translate into deliberate and pragmatic approaches to transformation remain worthless/useless. What is clear here is that people need to have a purpose for which they live out certain values. The indigenous African wisdom of ubuntu teaches that the purpose is the general well-being of everyone which is a responsibility of all in the community.

Accepting the principle of Virtue ethics, one realizes that Ubuntu anthropological philosophy has a very rich perspective to enrich behavioural change for positive societal transformation as it articulates a relational, loving and compassionate worldview. Ubuntu has an interdependent nature. It articulates the idea that “I am because we are.” In effect, one’s being cannot be detached from his or her social context and anthropological nature (Bolden, 2014). In this sense, Ubuntu emphasizes the importance of the other person as it kills the spirit of selfishness and prompts a sense of responsibility. One then needs to identify which virtues are needed in the situation that is faced by the continent.

A Virtue Ubuntu Ethics, therefore, will be relying on and upholding the value of collaboration, inter-relational cooperation, interdependence and communal perspectives of indigenous African wisdom to invoke needed virtuous agents for action and behaviour. Such an approach to theology and ethics from a Christian African perspective would realise the demand to extend the discourse to the multifaceted human realities like ethical leadership, inclusion and diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, and other minority groupings as well as economic re-arrangement. A virtue ubuntu-oriented Christian scholarship will project virtuous agents that can affirm a strong political arrangement that will be sensitive to the basic needs required by every human being to live a life of dignity. It advocates for a conscious effort of developing a mindset and conscience of the populace that cares and respects others and the importance of harmony in the face of diversity. For in our Ubuntu, relationships with others concern for the wellbeing, dignity and respect are paramount (Bolden, 2014). “It offers a means for expressing the interdependent and inter-subjective dimensions of human experience and calls for an inclusive approach that embraces diversity, collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge” (Bolden, 2014, p. 7). In this sense, A

virtue Ubuntu ethics is a potent tool to build up a community, to connect through community support, dignity, and identity which could be achieved through mutualism, empathy, generosity, honesty, integrity, collaboration and community commitment (Jolley, 2011). It has the power to produce communities and corporations where humans act with respect toward one another, to bind and link them together, which could result in a better community nationally and globally (Jolley, 2011).

Moreover, A virtue Ubuntu orientation has the unconceivable capacity of enhancing self and others, erasing all negatives of humane threats as culture and society's values and beliefs could be enhanced. Ubuntu matures characters of individuals, families, and communities to promote integrity and teamwork (Jolley, 2011). Such a perspective should be applied to all fibre of society, institutions and systems/structures of socio-political and economic influence. It would serve as a projection of the indigenous value of ubuntu as the corrective ideology to bad governance and for that matter corruption that befalls the African continent. What is suggested is that "the members of a community should adopt a we-thinking attitude instead of an individualistic-thinking (outlook)" (Mighe, 2017, p. 1213) translated in practical virtuous characters in the various place and institutions of work.

Nevertheless, this virtue-ubuntu approach to Christian African scholarship, demands a deliberate paradigm shift in the entire educational system in the continent. this is so because, ubuntu values need to penetrate into social institutions/systems for positive societal transformation. This education in early life could restore humans to the "acknowledgement of self, and individuality in the community that thrives on love and attention, (which) is beneficial, and essential to normal human existence" (Jolley, 2011, p. 7). At the early stage of life, humans must be taught to be more human and accepting of others. It must be acknowledged early that humanness strengthens 'self' and 'other', family, and community, which intend strengthen towns and countries. On the other hand, it must be made clear that "dehumanizing another is dehumanizing self, in relationships, friendships, marriages, communities, businesses, and national strengths" (Jolley, 2011, p. 7).

CONCLUSION

The inheritance of cultural heritage and identity that has characterised the African Christian scholarly works is enriching. This is because it places emphasis on our Ubuntu. However,

despite the valuable anthropological philosophy of ubuntu common to the majority of African cultures, the present crisis on the continent, even with the down of popular Christianity presents a paradox. The continent is presently bewitched with socio-economic distress where an even distribution of resources and a constant economic evolution are far from being a reality. Ubuntu articulates a relational and compassionate worldview. It is a powerful apparatus for building community's oneness as it seeks to restore integrity and the spirit of teamwork. This pristine value should translate into the everyday ethics and beliefs that influence the behaviour, choices and actions of the people on the continent. Thus, a Virtue-ubuntu ethics and theology.

The virtue ubuntu approach will demand pragmatic political arrangement and structural changes in the systems to fight against bad governance, political instabilities, insecurities, and socioeconomic and gender inequalities that bewitched the African continent. the premise is found in the pristine value of concern for the wellbeing of others in the community, the interrelations, interdependence and the acknowledgement of diversity in human society.

***Nora K. Nonterah, PhD**

Lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies
Kwame Nkurumah University of Science & Technology,
Ghana.
Email: nnonterah@gmail.com

****Kenneth Oppong**

MPhil Candidate at the Department of Religious Students
Kwame Nkurumah University of Science & Technology,
Kumasi, Ghana.
Email: oppongk@aua.ac.ke.

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