

## REVIEW ARTICLE

## IS AFRICAN THEOLOGY STILL ALIVE?

by

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African theology seems to be at the point of losing its dynamism for which it was known since the last 30 years. Some people declare that African theology is dead, others even go to the extent of saying that it never existed. However one thing is sure: African theology is in search of new epistemological landmarks for the interpretation of religious experiences in a world that is becoming more and more global. This issue is addressed in two recent books published in French last year. The first, *Théologie africaine au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Quelques figures, Vol, 1*, (Editions Universitaires de Fribourg, Suisse, 2002, 190 pages) is edited by Bénézet Bujo and Juvénal Illunga Muya. The other, *Vers une théologie africaine. La théologie et les théologiens au Congo : projets et défis dans la période de l'après indépendance 1960 - 1990* (Editions Universitaires de Fribourg, Suisse, 2002, 361 pages) is a thesis written by Emmanuel Ntakarutimana.

The aim of this review article is to present these two books by pointing out their contributions to a new self awareness of African Theology and the questions they pose to contemporary research in this field.

**Pioneers of African theology**

In their book, Bénézet Bujo and Juvénal Illunga, theologians from the Democratic Republic of Congo, reaffirm a strong conviction: African theology is not dead, it is alive and dynamic. This

dynamism can be shown through the presentation of some “figures” of African theology: nine theologians from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Benin Republic and Nigeria. The second book by Emmanuel Ntakarutimana is an analysis centred on the beginning of quest for theology as an organised scientific discipline, in Congo Kinshasa. The author highlights the sources of this theology, its methods and different stages of development, and questions its capacity to produce a Christian community open to questions posed by a global world.

### **African Theology through Representative Figures**

In the first book, it could be interesting for the reader to start from the documents in the last chapter of the book about the famous debate in 1960 between Tharcisse Tshibangu and Alfred Vanneste, on the possibility or not of an African theology which takes its bearing from elements of African cultures. From these documents, one can measure the work done by African theologians who no longer ask the question of the “possibility” of but rather practice African theology, in different ramifications, systematic, biblical, moral, fundamental, pastoral theology, and ecclesiology.

The reader then turns to the nine theologians presented in this first volume, according to their ages, from the eldest to the youngest.

The first is the Congolese Vincent Mulago (1924-). In order to produce an African theology, this disciple of Placide Tempels had to develop first of all an African philosophy. His theology establishes a connection between Neo-Scholastic philosophy and ethnological study of the Bantu cultures.

The Cameroonian, Engelbert Mveng (1930-1995) was the first to develop the concept of “anthropological poverty”. He forced African theologians to ask the following question: where was the Christian God when the West was subduing Africans to slavery and colonisation? These inhuman treatments, according Mveng, are responsible for the pauperisation of the African.

Tharcisse Tshibangu (1933-) and Alphonse Ngindu Mushete (1937-) from the Democratic Republic of Congo, were among the first to sustain the thesis of the possibility of a theology of “African colour”. They both contributed to the reflection on theology as a critical science in dialogue with other epistemologies.

The contributions of Sidbe Semporé (1938-) to African theology are centred on the field of ecclesiology. This Dominican from Burkina Faso wants to renew religious life and the priestly ministry. This entails going beyond the hierarchical conception of the ecclesial community. Semporé’s work also draws the attention of African theologians towards the interpretation of the impact of African Christian indigenous churches, a domain that has not been well developed. His work comes close to that of Bathélemy Adokounou (1940-), from Benin Republic, who founded the “*sillon noir*”, for the inculturation of Christian faith in Africa.

The work of the Congolese, Oscar Bimwenyi Kweshi (1938-) is indispensable for one who wants to study the fundamentals of African theology. He seeks to formulate a theological discourse that will be truly African and grounded on the African religious heritage, in dialogue with the Christian heritage. His theology has connections with that of another Congolese Bénézet Bujo (1940-) who seeks to create a link between African and Christian ethics. Most of Bujo’s research has been centred on the concept of Christ as the Proto-Ancestor, mediator and model for moral life in African societies.

The youngest in the list is Elochukwu Eugene Uzukwu (1945). This Nigerian Spiritan is presented as one of the most productive liturgists. His numerous works develop the concept and practice of inculturation from different angles, especially, liturgy and ecclesiology. However his approach is original. It is centred on the synthesis of a socio-political interpretation of African traditions on the one hand and the contributions of modernity on the other. From there he proposes to renew the ministry in the Church from the African conception of authority as “listening”. He also advocates for the autonomy of African Churches while maintaining the relationship of communion in the universal Church. Finally, Uzukwu believes that living the “Church as the Family of God”

will be a significant contribution to the project for the reconstruction of African theology.

The advantage of this presentation is that it avoids the classical presentation of African theologians according to three currents: inculturation, liberation, and reconstruction. In African theology the boundaries among these currents are very porous. Even when certain theologians identify with a particular current, a meticulous analysis of their works shows that they all bear the same missiological preoccupation: the inculturation of Christian faith in Africa. This objective is well analysed by the second book that we now propose to examine.

### **The Example of Congo Kinshasa: The Question of Method**

As indicated above, Ntakirutimana's analysis is centred on theology in Congo during the period from 1960-1990. The book comprises of two parts. The first part is a synthesis of the historical evolution of theological movement in the Congo. The second part analyses the methods adopted by Congolese theologians, shows their limits, and prepares the way for what the author calls "integrative inculturation".

Ntakirutimana notes that from the famous debate between Tharcisse Tshibangu and Alfred Vanneste on the possibility of an African theology, to the Christology of Christ as Proto-Ancestor (Bénézet Bujo), through the *theandric* structure of revelation (Oscar Bimwenyi Kweshi), Congolese theologians agree on one point: African religious experience is not only the condition of possibility of access to revelation, but also, forms an integral part of the process of revelation. There is circularity between God's revelation of God's-self and the reception of this revelation by a given community.

According to the author, the pertinence of this theology lies in the fact that it has fostered the rooting of Christian faith in Congo under the episcopacy of Cardinal Malula: the Roman Missal for the church in Zaire (Zairan rite), the institution of the laity as Bakambi (parish leaders), and the production of new rites for religious profession.

However the author notes that the danger facing the theology of inculturation is the fixation on the question of African identity. Moreover the inflation of the Ancestor Metaphor may give the impression that African theologians reduce God to the limits of their culture. This is where another Congolese, Kä Mana, proposes to ground the theology on the Word of God. From his Lutheran background, Pastor Kä Mana, asks African theologians to think of Christ under the mode of the Messiah whose force is not in the past but in the future to come (p. 32-33).

In the second part of his book Ntakarutimana questions the methods adopted by Congolese theologians. Here the author underlines an important point that has not really received adequate attention till date: theological movements in Africa have always borrowed their methods from Western theologies which themselves, depend on western philosophies (p.97). Hence the crisis of African theologies reveals the internal crisis of Western theologies. The heart of Western philosophical enterprise is the question about truth. The first crystallisation of the question is the crisis of metaphysic, that is, the displacement of the conception of being as essence and of truth as the correspondence of the intellect and the object by Heidegger's existentialism. After Heidegger, Western philosophy discovered a particular interest in language and hermeneutics. Historicity then became the criterion of truth. However, none of these epistemologies has been able to resolve definitively the question of truth. Though hermeneutics seems to dominate contemporary theological discourse it is obliged to more and more modesty.

This debate continues in African Theology. The Christology of Christ as Ancestor borrows from the essentialist discourse of scholastic metaphysics and from ethnology. Oscar Bimwenyi Kweshi needed the epistemologies of contemporary philosophies of language and hermeneutics under the influence of Heidegger and Bultmann in order to defend African religious experience as condition of possibility of revelation. When Kä Mana asks Africans to turn resolutely to the future given by the Word of God, he is borrowing from evangelical theology enrobed in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt. If the limit of inculturation is its inability to

emphasise the rupture produced by the coming of God to a particular culture, that of evangelical theology is its inability to integrate the socio-historical conditions in which Africans receive and live their faith.

This is where Ntakirutimana calls for an integrative hermeneutics: how can man welcome the God who comes to join man in his human condition, without being determined by the historical conditions of man? An hermeneutics which will take care of this question, says the author, has to take seriously both African holistic vision of the universe, and the Western vision of the world that are deeply rooted in contemporary Africa. At the same time, this hermeneutics should show how we can welcome gratuitously, the God of love who comes to us in Jesus Christ, whose Spirit cannot be domesticated by any culture.

### **Challenges to be faced**

These two books are thought provoking. I just want to point out three issues that require more research in African theology. This I hope will help to prolong the debate opened by pioneer African theologians.

### **Christian God and African Cultures**

It is important for the new generation of theologians to know that African theology has come a long way and that pioneers of this theology have built a strong background for African theology. From them we learn a theological truth: every theology is culturally determined. Hence African theology cannot avoid questioning the significance of African cultures and traditions for the Christian faith. However, theology has to handle the cultural issue with care. One must understand the reserve of young theologians towards the cultural project of the pioneers of African theology. The younger generation is born in a period that is marked by culture crises, suffice it to name, Rwanda, Congo Kinshasa, Côte d'Ivoire. God must not be determined by any culture. If God is culturally determined, then God's truth is destroyed and Christians will not be able to announce God as the One who comes towards man and who

invites the African to conversion. Ntakirutimana's integrative inculturation is a good move, but does not offer satisfactory elements for a solution. African theology is yet to develop a Christian theology that draws its bearing from the Trinitarian revelation which as far as I know is the specificity of the God of the Crucified Jesus of Nazareth.

### **Christian missionary Enterprise in Africa: *tabula rasa*?**

It has become vulgar in African theology to reduce the Christian missionary enterprise in Africa to the famous "*tabula rasa*". This thesis holds that western missionaries destroyed pre-Christian African cultures in collaboration with western colonization, hence the fight for the rehabilitation of African identity. Ntakirutimana's book rightly critiqued the fixation on the question of identity but did not escape the "*tabula rasa*" trap. Even the good works done by missionaries are relegated to the sphere of personal ambitions of certain missionaries (p. 24, note 13).\*

African theologians need to go back to history and take note of what contemporary historians discover in the archives. That the first Western missionaries did not know a lot about other cultures is true. That they destroyed African cultures is partially true. Researches done by contemporary historians permit to affirm that the first missionaries did more to conserve African cultures than the destructions we attribute to them. Lamf Sanneh notes that contrary to the colonizers who had no respect for African cultures, missionaries especially Protestants, had the courage to adopt vernacular languages for the translation of the Bible. On adopting vernacular languages, they recognised cultural differences as well as the translatability of the gospel<sup>1</sup>.

For this enterprise, missionaries collected and documented the customs and rituals of the people; they built up the grammar and dictionaries for their languages. Even if the goal was the diffusion of the Christian faith, the possibility of naming God in their mother tongues was for Africans catalyst for a new awareness of their identity. On personal basis, children, women, men were happy to have access to knowledge despite their economic and social status

in the traditional society. They were happy to forge an auto-reflection that linked the past and the present together in one memory. On the general level, a new awareness of their identity through the Christian faith gave Africans the courage to forge nationalism strong enough to bring colonial governments into question. In many countries, the missionaries had to pay the price of this work because the colonial governments accused them of creating African nationalism.

### **Did the North African Church collapse because of lack of inculturation?**

Another widely admitted thesis, reasserted by Ntakirutimana, is that the Church in North Africa collapsed because of lack of inculturation<sup>2</sup>. This is partially true. Here again we have to go back to history. A recent research conducted by Maureen A. Tilley<sup>3</sup> of the University of Dayton, Ohio, shows that the Church in North Africa was a contextualised church. It was characterized by an episcopate whose collegial structure corresponded to the mentality of the epoch. Bishops were very close to villages and gathered regularly to resolve issues concerning their churches. They only sent a delegation to Rome when a problem could not be resolved among them. The problem is that from 429 to 647 CE, this episcopate suffered attacks respectively from the Vandals, the Byzantine Empire, and the Roman imperialism up till the pontificate of Gregory the Great. These attacks weakened the internal organisation of the Church, to the extent that when Islam arrived in North Africa, it met a Church whose force was already sapped. More research needs to be done on this question. The collegial structure of the episcopate of the defunct North African Church could be a model for new exercise of authority in African churches today<sup>4</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

From the above reflections, there is no doubt that African theology is still alive. The problem is that there is a gap between the pioneers and the younger generation. The major reason is the culture crisis

in contemporary Africa. However, one must not neglect the fact that the new generation is trained in universities suspicious of the qualities of African theology. This then means that there is need for more and intense dialogue between the two generations. The pioneers need to explain to the younger generation that the respect for the dignity of African cultures and traditions does not endanger the identity of the God of Jesus Christ as well as the missionary mandate of the Church. On the contrary, it is a condition of the possibility of the enrooting of the Christian faith in Africa. This can revive the interest of the younger generation in the history of African theology which remains a lacuna in their formation. The two books we have just analysed are good steps towards this dialogue.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1989. *Encountering the West. Christianity and the Global Cultural Process*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1993, pp. 74-75.

<sup>2</sup> This assertion came out clearly in the Lineamenta for African Synod 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Maureen, A. TILLEY, « The collapse of a Collegial Church : North African Christianity on the Even of Islam », in *Theological Studies*, 62/2003, pp 3-22.

<sup>4</sup> See Elochukwu. E. Uzukwu, *A listening Church. Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*. Orbis Books, New York, 1996.

