

## **Why African theology?**

### **Theologies that matter are developed with and by the people in their cultural environment!**

#### **“You may, and you must have an African Christianity!”**

Many have undertaken the work of setting forth the meaning of God's Word to others. Some of the individuals and groups serve as fine examples to us of how to approach the Bible; others do not, for they have misunderstood the nature of the Scriptures and have abused them as a result. Theology should not be a theoretical philosophy of a merely scientific approach. Rather, it should help the people to understand the will of God revealed in Scripture. Nevertheless, it also needs to be applied in the people's everyday life. People of all cultures are invited in the Gospel to follow Christ. Therefore, theology should prepare the ground on which they can walk and practice what has been written without giving up their cultural identity.

How about Christendom in today Africa with some of the largest churches in the world? Do we still copy European or American patterns of living our faith, or have we found our own expressions? Have modern Biblical interpretations played a role in overcoming the traumata of Transatlantic Slave Trade and colonialism? Has the Christian faith helped African peoples to create a new self-worth identity even though it has been abused, before, to justify the inhumanity of treating our whole race like animals and denying us human rights with the unbelievable, “scientifically” rubber-stamped excuse we would have no souls and would have been created for hard work?

The Bible verse “Princes shall come forth out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God” (Psalms 68:31) became essential in Black Theology and the religious roots of Afrocentrism as well as in a reinterpretation of the Judaeo- Christian tradition. When we examine the situation of alienation of the African American community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The forerunners as E.W. Blyden, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and Marcus Garvey, we will find that their exegetical interpretation of Psalm 68:31 traces the development of three religious movements: the African Orthodox Church/ African Greek Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Hebrews and the Rastafari which took as their underlying theme Ethiopia/ Africa, perceived as Zion, the Promised Land. These brought forth today's independence of sub-Africa. The Italian Pope Paul VI (1897- 1978) was the first pope who visited Africa in 1969. He came to Uganda and whilst he was there, he spoke to African bishops at an All-Africa Symposium. He said: “You may, and you must have an African Christianity”.<sup>1</sup> The Anglican theologian John S. Mbiti from Kenya (\*1931) is being called the “father of Modern African Theology”. His approach is ethno-philosophical and he has done researches on African religions. His writings have gained international acceptance and he has lectured as guest professor in different universities in Africa, Europe, the U.S. and Canada. He stated that Christianity in Africa has expanded at historically

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<sup>1</sup> The very first magisterial document to make mention of the religious traditions of African peoples, and in a positive light for that matter, is *Africae Terrarum* of Pope Paul VI, issued on 1967.

unprecedented extraordinary rates and that the causes of this are missionaries, African Christians, Bible translation, and the nature of African Religion. The last was very receptive to Christianity, which was consistent with African religious values; Jesus Christ was the new element.<sup>2</sup> In addition, he said that the missionaries did not bring God to Africa, but rather the God who brought them was already present in Africa.<sup>3</sup>

African Christians are first of all human beings of an identity shaped by our cultures. Unfortunately, some Western churches still ignore the fact that during colonial times, they forced Africans to overtake their lifestyle when becoming Christians. As a result, African Christians have lived with a contradictory double-consciousness, divided between two world-views, two traditions, and two ways of being human for long time. To be African and Christian had been presented to us as antagonistic to each other. The churches also have mostly failed to officially apologize for the inhumanity of slave trade in which they had their part. So African theology, today, has the task of helping the people to create an awareness of what has happened and then seek reconciliation. In addition, it needs to reverse the contradictory reality and reclaim the African traditions in order to produce an incarnated Christianity that is relevantly African. Mbiti attempts to underscore the significance of the African way of being human in the world because without it, African Christianity is superficial and African humanity is in subjection to a foreign theology and ideology. For him, it is not uniformity that matters, but rather diversity in which there is enough room for all types of theologies. Rev. Dr. Kwame Bediako (1945- 2008), the founder and late director of the Akrofi-Christaller Institute for Theology, Mission, and Culture in Akropong/ Ghana, refers to this as the "principle of theological freedom. Authority can be legitimate only where there is freedom that allows and aids other people to fulfil them. The implication for humanity is that community and communion, authority democratically exercised, and freedoms to be for others are all fundamental to a community of faith".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development" in R. Pierce Beaver, ed., *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples*, Pasadena, California. William Carey Library, 1973, pp. 79-95

<sup>3</sup> John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, (SPCK), Scotland, 1970 pp.89ff

<sup>4</sup>Kwame Bediako "Identity and Integration: An Inquiry into the nature and problems of Theological Indigenization in selected early Hellenistic and Modern African Christian Writers," doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Aberdeen, 1983 (henceforth referred to as *Identity and Integration*): p.380