

“Stretch Forth Thy Wings and Fly”
Theological Education in the African Context

by
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Memory Lane for Renewal

For one who for fifteen years, served as an executive of the World Council of Churches’ Programme on Theological Education in its various incarnations, it is not only a privilege to be part of this project but also exciting and renewing travel down memory lane. This project may not be treated as just recalling the past but also, and perhaps more importantly, as an exercise in renewal.

Story of Eagle among Chicken: Narrative Theology, Africa’s First Love

Africans are not given to the propositional style; rather they are given to narrative culture. The title of this piece is rooted in the oral and narrative culture of *homo africanus*. It is taken from an aphorism of a great Ghanaian, Aggrey of Africa of Phelps-Stokes Foundation fame, who told the story/parable of a naturalist who upon seeing an eagle domesticated among chicken, undertook to encourage it to regain its identity as an eagle. After days of trying, the eagle finally “stretched out its wings and with the strength of an eagle mounted up higher and higher.”¹

The parable encapsulated Africa’s story as the second largest continent which by contact with European nations has been subjected to ideologies of exploration/discovery, slavery, racism, colonialism and Christian missions, which have left well-nigh indelible marks on Africa. These contacts have resulted in the emasculation of *homo africanus*, so to speak, caste in the image and likeness of Europeans, a North Atlantic captivity and Peter Pan Syndrome. Aggrey’s parable of the eagle among chicken is making a case for

¹ Smith, *Aggrey of Africa. A Study of Black and White*, 36.

Africans to recover their identity² among the comity of races, peoples, tribes and tongues.

Nyimpa Ɔkɔnsu na Ɔbɔhyira.

In African cultures wisdom is characteristically couched in proverbs. The proverb at the head of this section is an Akan proverb that “the one whose duty and good service is to fetch water for the household, is the one who is likely to break the pot for fetching the water.” In the nationalist age and in the context of ideologies of racism and colonialism, it has been the practice to condemn the European incursion into Africa. The Akan wisdom is that if negative things have been associated with European incursion into Africa, so too have there been some very positive results.

The Aggrey aphorism is designed to remind us that Africans have an identity of their own, which may not be ignored. Second, the other Akan proverb is the reminder that it is not helpful to belabour the shortcomings of previous generations even if we must learn from their mis-steps. Third, the parable and the proverbs signal to us that truth and wisdom may not be mediated only through propositional style. Narrative Theology measured in terms of stories, songs, proverb, art, becomes the measure of Theology in Africa, even though it will exist alongside the style imported through foreign encounters. The evident success of Christianity, especially through African Initiatives in Christianity owes much to the narrative characteristic of *homo africanus*’ epistemology and ontology.

North Atlantic Legacy re Theology

Theology in Africa began with North Atlantic paradigm and artefacts, which also shortchanged African identity, ethos, use and creativity.

² Bediako, *Theology and Identity. The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa.*

(i) Enlightenment Culture

The Enlightenment culture was the solvent of Christian theology. René Descartes, the French philosopher and mathematician (1596 – 1650), gives the quintessential statement of that culture when he writes *cogito ergo sum* i.e. “I think, therefore I am.” That articulated the twin pillars of the culture’s epistemology and ontology, namely rationality and individualism. That already diverges from *homo africanus*’ epistemology and ontology. The latter puts much store by passion and community. *Homo africanus*’ style is nearer the biblical notion that ‘to know’ more than intellectual pursuit, is engagement in lived experience. Bridges-Johns states it thus, “this (biblical) knowing is more by the heart than by the mind and conveys engagement in lived experience and its dynamics are more of love and response than that of subject and object. Knowledge of God, therefore, is not measured by the information one possesses, but how one lives in response to God.”³

The style of the genre of theology emerging from African Christian Initiatives is rediscovering and modelling this insight.⁴ That style of theology belongs to the genre styled theology by the people.⁵ This genre in not so many words, challenges the hegemony of clergy in the practice of theology, insisting on the participation of each and all (cf 1 Peter 3:15). In that tradition theology is not only reflection and transmitting body of information. Theology is as well and perhaps more importantly, participating and doing the Word of God.

³ Bridges-Johns, “From Babel to Pentecost: The Renewal of Theological Education,” 138.

⁴ Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*; Welbourn and Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home*; Pobe, and Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity*.

⁵ Amirtham and Pobe, *Theology by the People. Reflections on Doing Theology in Community*.

The foregoing stands alongside the North Atlantic legacy represented by the University Departments and Seminaries. But even in the latter there is a growing consciousness that the North Atlantic legacy needs a revisit, review and renewal. Representative of that growing consciousness is Jean-Marc Ela, a Roman Catholic theologian from Cameroun. He writes: “in Africa, the confrontation between the message of the Gospel and the African universe must bring forth a meaning with the poor to transform the lives of African Christians. Today, the faith of the Church in Africa is in danger of death, because the Church tends to forget its cultural dimensions as marked by its Greco heritage. If the faith of the Africans is not to die, it must become a vision of the world that they can feel is theirs; European cultural dimensions must be stripped away. There is an urgent need to reject present foreign models of expressions, if we are to breathe new life into spoken Word. Our Church must express a Passover of Language, or the meaning of the Christian message will not be understood. One of the primary tasks of Christian reflection in black Africa is to tally, reformulate our basic faith through the mediation of African culture. In place of the cultural presuppositions of Western Christianity, namely *logos* and *ratio*, we must substitute African symbolism. Beginning with the ecclesial furrow where the language of faith germinates, we must restore the Gospel’s power to speak to Africans through the primordial symbol of their existence.”⁶

(ii) Culture of Individualism versus Traditional Communitarian Epistemology

The Enlightenment Culture promoted a culture of individualism. Contrary to the legacy of the culture of individualism, African societies have communitarian epistemologies and ontologies. The Northern Legacy of theological education has been an exercise in producing professional and theologically educated clergy and thus create a

⁶ Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 44

gulf between the professional class and the not theologically educated laity. It is not without interest that a lay person who studies theology in Ghana is openly styled *sɔfo* i.e. priest. There is need for theology in Africa to capture the idea that theology is the common patrimony of all who desire to “know” God. This has far reaching consequences for theology and accreditation. We are yet to explore the shape of theology in community rather than as individuals who happen to be in the same school. How may accreditation be done in theological education in community? In any case, the idea of theology in community demands a re-orientation of theology as the activity of all persons of faith. That is the significance of the catch-phrase, “theology by the people.” Theology in Africa is not a finished product, it is under construction and development.

(iii) Sharp Distinction between Theology and Spirituality

The Northern legacy tended to rather distinguish sharply between theology and spirituality. The irony is that the subject of theology is God, Ultimate Reality and, therefore, spirituality cannot be an extra – it is integral to theological construction (cf. I Cor. 2: 10-12). As the noted preacher at Constantinople, Evagrius Ponticus (348–99) put it, “a theologian is one who truly prays. And one who truly prays is a theologian.” As such spirituality and worship are the hermeneutic for probing theological education and ministry. African Initiatives in Christianity are living that orientation in theology in Africa.

The African reality ensures that the distinction is untenable. There are common threats of this 21st century⁷: terrorism (Kenya and Tanzania had a bomb last); climate change (droughts and floods); poverty (almost the synonym for Africa); genocide and

⁷ Winquist, *Epiphanies of Darkness. Deconstruction in Theology*.

racism and tribalism (cf. Rwanda, Burundi, Darfur, South Africa, Angola and Mozambique under Portuguese rule); disease and crying need for better health facilities. Christian theology that is articulating the gospel of hope, has its work cut out for it. The God-word, the gospel of hope has to engage the social, political and economic challenges of the African scene. The crisis of cruel racism and tribalism, unemployment are not just technical problems in search of some perfect plan; they are rooted in the imperfections of humanity manifested as societal indifference and individual callousness. Such issues are indices of risk and insecurity. The solution to these is to tap into the moral underpinnings of the nation.

Of course, theology cannot go it alone and on its own because the issues and differences require changes in government policy as well as changes in heart and mind. On the ground, this means that theology in Africa must of necessity be engaging dialogue between the God-word and Social, Economic and Political Issues. That is the significance of the Theology of Liberation in South Africa and of the Theology of Reconstruction in East Africa and South Africa.⁸ From West Africa also the present writer also explored Religion and Politics, Church-State relations and Theology and Economics.⁹

These forays into the engagement between Theology and Social issues were earlier often critiqued as ‘Politics donning Religion/Theology.’ But the concern was to attest to the idea that issues of politics and economics can as well be religious-spiritual issues¹⁰, a departure from the “orthodoxy” of the time that said “keep religion out of

⁸ Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction, Nation Building and Human Rights*; Mugambe, *Theology of Reconstruction*.

⁹ Pobee, *Kwame Nkrumah and the Church in Ghana 1949-1966*; Pobee, *Religion and Politics*; Pobee, *The Worship of the Free Market and the Death of the Poor*.

¹⁰ Abraham and Mbuy-Beya, *Spirituality of the Third World. A Cry for Life*; Sheldrake, *Spirituality as History*; Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation. Towards Political Holiness*.

politics.” The development in Africa was in consonance with the insights, of the early Church Father, Metropolitan John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople (AD 398 – 404) that Christians worship at two altars, the altar in the sanctuary and the altar in the Marketplace. Further, it was an insight and thrust of the ecumenical movement.

(iv) Ideology of Christendom Versus Sense of Pluralism

When I was *in statu pupillari* at the University of Ghana, the word ‘theology’ was reserved for Christian Theology. The department was called Department of Divinity and later Department of Theology. It has its roots in part in the Early Church Fathers’ epigram *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est* i.e. outside the Church there is no salvation. By implication non-Christian religions have no theology to be studied. When Christianity was declared the only religion of the Roman Empire, the ideology of Christendom emerged and became the cultural solvent of Christian theory.

Africa, the second largest continent, is a continent of plurality – races, tribes, religions, cultures etc., - which cannot be ignored or shortchanged. Within individual nations, pluralism is in evidence. The significance of this fact of pluralism is that though we have different stories, we also have common hopes, at the bottom, life in abundance. Though we may have different origins and may not look the same, we nevertheless aspire to move towards better future for ourselves and successions.

The rising consciousness that pluralism is the context of theologizing issued in the emergence in the 1960s of Departments of Religious Studies (Nigeria, Botswana, Cape Town/Republic of South Africa). The case of the University of Ghana is particularly interesting for its self-designation – Department for the Study of Religions. Though the underlying aim of Departments of Religious Studies is to foster dialogue between the

major religious faculties and institutions of the context, the Dept for the Study of Religions especially highlights dialogue between persons of different religious persuasions for mutual respect, understanding and peace and humanity. The fact of differences of faith persuasions and doctrines may not be allowed to becloud the humanity of the other person. Thus the bottom line issue of religion is not so much the dogma as being human.

A Christian theology emerging from a Department of Religious Studies is forced to focus on the fundamental and critical issue of Christian mission and theology, namely the uniqueness of Christ. Baldly put, the issue is this: why may one, an African, commit to Jesus, Christ and Lord rather than traditional gods, Muhammed or the Buddha. Theology with a hermeneutic of pluralism is a commitment to encouraging freedom of thought and speech. It signals that asking the right questions in theology is essential for renewing theology.

It may not occasion surprise that the first Festschrift in Black Africa was in honour of Rev. Prof Christian Goncelves Baeta under the title *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*.¹¹ That volume came from the Department for the Study of Religions.

2 *Hey Presto Ecumenical Imperative!*

This volume is celebrating the centenary of Edinburgh conference of 1910. It has been as a stream rather than static institution. It has thus developed its own momentum and renewed emphases. Konrad Raiser has helpfully outlined seven marks of renewed ecumenical vision: (i) Calling the whole Church to bring the whole gospel to the whole world. (ii) Ecumenism involves the whole Church in the daily lives of people; it is at once concerned with human and societal matters as about ecclesial matters.

¹¹ Pobe, *Religion in a Pluralistic Society. Essays in Honour of Prof. C.G. Baeta.*

(iii) Ecumenical vision incorporates *Communion* and is dedicated to expressing *communion*. (iv) Such vision empowers peoples to take their lives into their own hands and shape it. (v) Ecumenism opts for and engages in dialogue and solidarity. (vi) Ecumenism is committed to and endeavours to live a culture of sharing and caring for life. (vii) The vocation and dedication of ecumenism is also peace-building, conflict resolution and mediation.¹²

These seven marks of the renewed ecumenism means (a) theology must be characterized by holism i.e. interpenetration of sacred and secular, matter and spirit, individual and community. (b) Theology must be about everything and not some things. Ela writes: “a theologian must stay within the earshot of what is happening within the community, as that community can become the subject of mediation and prayer. In the end, a theologian is perhaps simply a witness and travelling companion, alert for signs of God and willing to get dirty in the precarious conditions of village life. Reflection crystallizes only if it is confirmed by specific questions.”¹³ (c) We are required to be in life together; no one may be an onlooker or mere passenger. Therefore, the formation process should be, *inter alia* empowering peoples, institutions etc., to claim everything for God. The process must be characterized by dialogue which demands openness of mind and hearts to others, rich and deep sense of vocation.

The Stream of Edinburgh 1910

Edinburgh 1910 emphasized the importance of education for mission, indeed, its handmaid. The particular perspective is to bring the ecumenical imperative to bear on theological and ministerial formation. Of course, in the nature of this case, the African

¹² Raiser, “Ecumenism in Search for a New Vision,” 25-42.

¹³ Ela *op cit* 11

genius was not brought into play and the constructs were very much North Atlantic fabrications. But 1957 marks a particular landmark in the dance between the ecumenical movement and Africa and for that matter, the Third World.

The Eagle Has Flown: Ethiopia Arises

In December 1957, the International Missionary Council met at Achimota, Accra, Ghana. In March of that year, Gold Coast had become sovereign independent state. That story was to open the gates to accelerated independence movement. Thus, African nationalism was a factor with which to reckon. The Independence of Ghana ushered a cascade of several African countries struggling to become independent sovereign states until today there are over fifty African states on the continent.

This independence movement was the highwater mark of a whole stream and movement which had flourished as Ethiopianism¹⁴ between 1872 and 1928. Mojola Agbebi a.k.a. David Brown Vincent (1860 – 1917) gave a classic statement of its agenda: “to render Christianity indigenous to Africa, it must be watered by native hands, turned by native hatchet and tended with native earth i.e. it is a curse if we intend forever to hold at the apron strings of foreign teachers doing the baby for age.”¹⁵ This is the profile of African Theology.

This corresponds to the report of the Church Conference on African Affairs, Westerville where the mission agencies themselves came to a similar conclusion: “Our particular American or European forms of Christianity are shaped according to the racial genius and culture of the Western world in accordance with our biological and social heritage. To impose those forms upon other peoples would be a kind of spiritual

¹⁴ Shepperson, “Ethiopianism: Past & Present.”

¹⁵ Vincent, *Africa and the Gospel*, 200; Pobee, *Skenosis – Christian Faith in an African Context*.

imperialism which is contrary to the due respect for humanity. Each nation, we believe, has its own contribution to make to the universal Christian fellowship.”

And so, Achimota I.M.C. 1957 meeting set up the Theological Education Fund¹⁶ (T.E.F) which has mutated as Programme on Theological Education (P.T.E), Ecumenical Theological Education (E.T.E.) These designations tell stories. Fund signals funding as a tool for effecting a vision of renewal. Ecumenical Education tells a vision of education and ministry as tools for forging and structuring the ecumenical imperative. And so, T.E.F. and its successor bodies promoted Joint Theological Colleges eg. Federal Theological Seminary, South Africa; Trinity College, Umuahia, Nigeria; St. Paul’s Theological College, Limuru, Kenya; Trinity Theological College, Legon, Ghana etc.

The rationale for such institutions was that if persons of different denominational commitment trained together, rubbing shoulders in the lecture room, dining hall, socialising together, the veil of suspicion about the different and the unfamiliar is broken and a better understanding and appreciation of the other person and other view points fostered.

However, the experience made so far makes us wonder whether putting together different denominations on one campus necessarily generates ecumenical commitment and consciousness. So, it is still on the agenda of ecumenical theological education to explore and discuss the glue that fosters ecumenical commitment, especially the sense of unity in diversity.

¹⁶ Linemann-Perrin, *Training for a Relevant Ministry: A Study of the Work of the Theological Education Fund*; Russell, *Contextualization: Origins, Meaning and Implications*; TEF, *Learning in Context*.

Associations of Theological Schools

To foster ecumenical consciousness, T.E.F. etc., was midwife of Associations of Theological Schools - Association of Theological Schools in Eastern Africa (A.T.I.E.A.), Association of Theological School in Southern and Central Africa (A.T.I.S.C.A.), West African Association of Theological Institutions (W.A.A.T.I.), Association of Theological Institutions in Central Africa (ASTHEOL Central), Association of Theological Institutions in Western Africa (ASTHEOL OEST), Circle of African Women in Theology and the continent-wide Conference of African Theological Institutions (C.A.T.I.).

The circumstances of African theological institutions i.e. lonely and few and far between, paucity of qualified African theological educators, inadequate resources made the Associations a necessity for mutual support in the region. The Associations, so to speak, were agents for creating the spirit of fraternal charity. In a way, there were attempts to model the spirit of the icon of St. Andrew, patron Saint of the Eastern Orthodox Church and St. Peter, patron saint of the Church of Rome that “theological dialogue only bears fruit when carried in a spirit of Fraternal Charity.” In such institutions attempts were made to engage differences with honesty and integrity as well as in the spirit of fraternal charity. The ecumenical imperative requires engagement with sore-points, prejudices, engaging points of excitability and irritation. Without such engagement renewal and transformation are impossible. Courage, forethought, imagination and insight are essential ingredients of the canopy of ecumenism to move away from age-old securities.

Renewal Is the Name of Ecumenical Imperative

Presidential aspirant Barack Obama had the word CHANGE as key word of his campaign. He expounded it in the words “you cannot do the same things and expect different results.” That is the essence of change, renewal and transformation. In any case, renewal and transformation are impossible without spirituality. Hence, the T.E.F. stream’s continued stress on spirituality. T.E.F. and its successor incarnations used a number of handles on to to the goal of renewal (a) Financial Viability and Enabling (b) Contextualization; (c) Theological Education by Extension (d) Theology by the People (e) Spirituality and Viability of Theological Education. In all these the principal actors were the Associations and Theological Schools. The staff of T.E.F.-P.T.E.-E.T.E. were principally enablers and to create forum and platform for the encounter between schools.

Women in Theology and Ministerial Formation

One of the most exciting developments on the continent of Africa over the past thirty years has been the face of women in theological and ministerial formation. The face is focused on the Circle of Africa Women in Theology (C.A.W.T.) in 1989.¹⁷ Women constitute more than half of Church and Society. And so, allow me to dip into another aphorism of Aggrey of Africa: “educate a man and you educate an individual, educate a woman you educate a family, a clan, the nation.” Especially because women constitute at least half of society, they represent a most critical and strategic agency of the formation of Church and Society.

¹⁷ Oduyoye and Kanyaro, *Talitha Qumi Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989*; Oduyoye, *The Will to Arise. Women, Tradition and Women in Africa*; Kanyoro, Musimbi and Njoroge, *Groaning in Faith. African Women in the Household of God*; Amoah, *Where God Reigns. Reflections on Women in God’s World*; Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa. African Women & Patriarchy*.

Allow me three points which may be pointers to what C.A.W.T. represents in the spectrum of theologies in Africa. First, instead of the usual Association of Women in Theology, they chose Circle of Africa Women in Theology. That self-designation already hints at the model of Church and theological education and institutions women seek. It captures the idea of the ‘Church in the Round.’ The topography makes it easy for all to be visible and participate. Such a perspective is consistent with and faithful to the ecumenical movement’s basic ecclesiology of *koinonia*.

Second, let us hear the word from one of the founders of C.A.W.T., “the future Church is one that ensures that women’s liberative theology becomes an integral part of the Church’s contribution made visible in the Church and the Academy.”¹⁸ This is a challenge worth pondering, especially in respect of securing life in abundance and fullness for all created by God and in God’s own image.

Third, the peculiar ethos of African Women in Theology has been articulated by an African Woman Theologian, Nyambura Jane Njoroge who writes, “The entry of African women theologians into the discourse has challenged the male-articulated scholarship as being gender specific and therefore, ignoring and rejecting women’s experiences and perspectives on African reality. Women contend that ethics constructed by male scholars do not go deep enough to confront and dismantle both Christian and African values, attitudes, beliefs and structures which are life-threatening to women. To a large extent, African theology and liberation theology have been uncritical of cultural values that approximate sexism in the church and society. It appears as though the men assumed that to attack Western- imposed values and structures will be enough to transform African

¹⁸ Oduyoye, “The Church of the Future in Africa. Its Mission and Theology,” 78.

communities.”¹⁹ This statement suggests that the African Theology represented by C.A.W.T. is not just reactionary; it is creative and constructive, endeavouring to be inclusive, making connections and participatory.

African Publications

One of the drawbacks of theology in African has been publications by Africans and with African perspectives. Even today, most of the standard textbooks are from the North. In the contemporary globalized village and ecumenical age, no group’s identity and insights may be left out; for ecumenical credibility each story, each identity, each spirituality should be in evidence at the table in the discussion. Without the African etch the ecumenical prism will lack something and suffer in its wholeness. For that reason African theologies have their valid place around the theological table.

Theology Serves Mission

The endeavour of WCC in respect of theology and theological education represents the perspective that theology is not only a scientific quest; it is also a service to the Church’s mission. But mission is not only evangelism (making converts); it is as well proclamation and obedience to the Will of God in the social, economic and political areas of human existence to redeem everything to God through Christ. For all those areas properly understood should foster the well-being of humans in God’s image and likeness. This is a lesson the ecumenical movement has reminded the world vis-à-vis the authentic vocation of theology.

At Once Theology and Education

Theological education and formation in Africa must be theologically sound and renewing as well as educationally sound and viable. It must be committed to articulating

¹⁹ Njoroge, *Kiama Kia Ngo. An African Christian Ethic of Resistance and Transformation*, 124.

God's self-disclosure in a plural world. But it is also committed to being educationally sound. Herbert Zorn writes, "theological education is education, commitment is not substitute to competence. Academic excellence, technical proficiency and breadth of experience are necessary components of theological education. The specific problem of the third world theological education concerns the standards by which these components are measured as well as the minimum requirements by which they can be achieved. Precisely at this point, the questions of 'hybridizing the transplant' and of 'search of native plants arise.' Standards for evaluating new patterns and methods ultimately have to be found within the context, whatever reference is made to Western standards."²⁰

Much has happened re theological education in Africa. Much still needs to be done. The viability of what develops must meet the identity and context of *homo africanus* so as to be vibrant, vital and viable.

A Last Word

The T.E.F. which continues today in E.T.E. has been a vital instrument in creating ecumenical consciousness in theological education and take the consequence. Its particular regional focus assisted in bringing peoples and insights of all races to the ecumenical table. Its mediation and popularization of contextualization has contributed to the growing fullness of the ecumenical conscientiousness. What is often overlooked is that without that particular ministry and mediation the World Council of Churches would not have had access to a vital renewal agency of theological institution. That mission is not complete. The W.C.C. would need to reinvent an institution like T.E.F. tradition to serve the purpose and role T.E.F fulfilled and will be vital for the next century.

²⁰ Zorn, *Viability in Context: Theological Seminary in the Third World. Seedbed or Sheltered Garden?* XI.

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