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Towards an African Theology of Christian Education

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Abstract

The gap between Christian profession and Christian practice among many African Christians is most probably because Christian education lags much behind Christian theology in Africa. Much work has been done by African Christian theologians to describe an African Christian theology, but relatively little work has been done on Christian education in Africa. There is therefore little theoretical framework for Christian teaching in Africa. As a result, much of the theological formulations in Africa are not being effectively communicated to African Christians. This paper is a bid to make a connection between African Christian theology and Christian education in Africa, to enhance effective communication of the Christian faith. Principles of effective teaching are described in terms agreeable to the abundant literature on African Christian theology. At the end a proposal is made for a possible formulation of an African theology of Christian education.

Introduction

The Christian faith has made giant strides in Africa, especially south of the Sahara, with numerous churches on the increase virtually on a daily basis. However, concerns are frequently being expressed that the explosive growth of the Christian church does not seem to be having the kind of effect Jesus envisioned for the Church when he gave the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). For example, while Anderson (2001, 275) points out that denominationalism by the missionaries, literal interpretations of the Bible by Africans, the lack of relevance of missionary theology, and reaction to Western colonialism have helped to cause proliferation of various types of churches in Africa, Tienou (2001, 156) observes that such church growth "seems to have minimal effect on African societies."

While the computer god dominating the developed countries is having a strong and growing foothold in the urban centres in Africa, the gods of the ancestors still rule over the lives of many people, including Christians. It is obvious that in many cases the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not being effectively communicated in Africa. This is, at least in part, a failure of Christian education. In view of the statement of Hayes (1991, 40) that "the value of evangelical Christian education will rise or fall on the soundness of its theological foundations," it is imperative that African Christian educators describe a theology that will back up an effective Christian education ministry in Africa.

The idea of God in the human soul often forms the point of contact for teaching about God. According to Berkhof (1990, 31) "Missionaries and students of comparative religion inform us that never a tribe was found without religion. The import of this is that the idea of God cannot be eradicated from the human soul. This point of contact has been observed in Africa, as elsewhere. According to Olowola (1993, 63) "there are good things in African traditional religion, which any Christian theology relevant to Africa must take into serious account. One example is the African belief in a Supreme Being." This aspect of African belief is an important factor in effectively teaching about God in Africa, and provides a further argument for a theology of Christian education in Africa. That is, there is the need to make Christian theology accessible and understandable to Africans through the medium of effective teaching.

The Task of Teaching

Theories may be developed about God by the theologian or Bible scholar, but it is left to the teacher to apply theology effectively in the lives of learners. It is in this light that De Jong declares (2003, 148) "Developing Christians through the medium of, or by means of, culture is the task of the teacher. Subjects are windows through which God's revelation may shine so that faith is expanded and strengthened." LeBar (1989, 53) points the way to carrying out this task, with reference to the pioneering work of Comenius in integrating students' previous knowledge with the subject being introduced: "On the foundation of the pupils' firsthand experience teaching would be imparting and guiding rather than storing the memory."

LeBar (1989, 53) advocates this approach on the grounds that this was Jesus' way of teaching such that, "Because He started where the pupil was and let the pupil's response and readiness guide the process, the Gospel record is full of the sayings and doings of other people.... We know a great deal about the culture of His day because there are so many references in the Gospels to the life of that day." In formulating a theology for Christian education in Africa, account must be taken of how Jesus taught. A theology of teaching must describe Christ-like teaching about God. However, for the purpose of this paper, such a theology must take bearing from African theological discourse

African theological discourse

According to Gangel (1991, 14) Christian education is "an education distinctly based upon theological propositions derived from the text of scripture." It means that an African theology of Christian education must be founded on Bible-based theological propositions in African perspective. Christian education in Africa would then be the means of communicating such a theology. That is why Olowola (1996, 21) says, "each theologian is bound to communicate the truth so that people can understand it." It is when teaching and learning take place that people can be said to have understood truth. In Africa, this requires that the African world view, rooted in African culture, be taken into consideration in communicating theological truth. Further more, it entails, as Bowers (2002,123) puts it, "the theological reflection required by the life of the contemporary African Christian community, as that community seeks to fulfil its calling under God within its context." The old and the new, the past and the present must be encompassed in a theology that is authentically African.

The knowledge of God is not new to Africans. Idowu (1962, 5) has noted about the Yoruba that "In all things they are religious." This raises great possibilities for communicating the Christian faith to the Yorubas because "Christianity, by its unique and universal message, stands the best chance of fulfilling that which is implied in the Yoruba concept of God." (Idowu 1962, 215). It means that at many points the Christian concept of God agrees with the African concept, such as in the idea of God's sovereignty and omnipresence. There is also good reason for Africans to have, as Setiloane (1979, 10) argues, "a unique and different theological point of view," because of "their cultural, geographical, spiritual, social and temperamental background." He argues that, "because theology is a verbalization of experience of the Divinity at work, difference in environment means different experiences of this one and all pervasive Divinity at work, and therefore different verbalization of these experiences."

Mbiti (1979, 25) supports the legitimacy of a different theological point of view for Africa on the grounds that, though not much had been written by African theologians by 1979, "as far as oral theology is being done by the masses of Christians in Africa, and largely in African languages, it is a genuine creation of African Christians (and) ... forms the foundation and basis for the development of African theological output." However, Unwene (1979, 33) is not as enthusiastic about African theological output as at 1979 because, he noted then that, "the need for our theologians to produce materials to meet the needs of the church in Africa is long overdue." Much has been written by African theologians since then.

Developments later include the use by African theologians of what Hovland (1993, 98–99) calls "the African traditions as a source for African theology." Such development is advocated by

Manus (2002, 49) who suggests that “indigenous non-biblical material should be appropriated as resources for biblical studies in Africa,” which is “both theologically legitimate and contextually urgent.” He proposes (2002, 52) what he calls “folklorizing” which means “a retrieval of indigenous African narratives, folktales and poetry for reconstructing biblical theology in the context of African cultures” while eliminating the dehumanising elements in the culture. When viewed in the light of Mbiti’s argument (1969, 237) that though missionary Christianity called Africans “out of their traditional environment, it did not redeem them within it,” which has presumably led to a poor impact of Christianity in Africa manifested in a lot of religious activity with little concomitant character transformation, the suggestions of Manus seem valid.

Today, many Africans merely ape Americans in preaching, dressing and general lifestyle. This implies, as Idowu had noted (1965, 23, 25), that “Christian Nigerians have not yet begun to do their own thinking and to grapple spiritually and intellectually with questions related to the Christian faith.” This should not have been the case, as God “has, in fact, revealed Himself to Nigerians and they have had some knowledge of Him in various ways according to their inborn capabilities.” Idowu however comes short of Olowola’s declaration of special revelation (1993, 25), whose work “is to complete the work of general revelation by meeting the need which general revelation cannot meet...to redeem man through Christ.” General revelation should be a starting point for Africans to learn what God has done for them in Christ. Nevertheless (Olowola 1965, 25), “the African Christian has much to learn from the practices of African traditional religionists as they serve the spirits.” They can emulate the zeal of the traditionalists in the way they go about the Christian faith.

Christians also need to make their theology understandable to other Africans. As Kato (1985, 12) puts it, “Africans need to formulate theological concepts in the language of Africa. But theology itself in its essence must be left alone.” In agreement, Onaiyekan declares (2001, 5) that “the burden of the African exegete would be to examine the word of God and apply its message to the realities of the here and now.” The aim is not to change the essence of theology, but to contextualize it to benefit Africans. This means that the African educator needs to understand the African context in seeking to teach Africans the ideas put forward by the theologians.

Biblical scholarship in Africa has experienced even more recent advances. This boost has its source in statements like that of S.O. Abogunrin (2005, 90) that “the quest for new ways of interpreting the Bible in Africa is not only legitimate, but also an important part of the development that will lead to authentic Christianity in Africa.” The same source (S.O. Abogunrin 2005, 15–16) argues that “the shifting sands of biblical criticism in the West have proved to be undependable foundations for Christian theology,”. Abogunrin argues that African biblical scholars need to decolonise biblical interpretation by responding to their religiously and culturally pluralistic context. In another work the same author argues (2004, 9) process is helped by the fact that “the Bible is more real to the peoples of Africa (than Western peoples), not because they cannot reason scientifically, but because most of the things described in the Bible still happen around us daily.” Therefore, for Abogunrin (2003, 17): “The task before biblical scholars in Africa is for a Christology that is authentically African, but which is at the same time catholic and from which Christians from other continents can draw lessons, inspiration and encouragement.” All this is possible because African culture is so similar to Jewish culture, making it possible for Africans to understand biblical realities.

Ukpong (2005, 17) suggests for African theologians the process of inculturation, which he describes as “a dynamic on-going process by which people consciously and critically appropriate the Bible and its message from within the perspectives and with the resources of their cultures.” This, he says, would “make a specifically African contribution to biblical interpretation and actualise the creative power of the Bible in African society.” The connective between African culture and the Bible message may be glimpsed in S.O. Abogunrin’s statement (2003, 11) that “Just as Africans proudly draw inspiration from their common ancestor, so also Christians find in Jesus Christ, their Head, the norms for daily living.”

Agreeing, Adamo (2005, 24–25) proposes that “using the Words of the Bible as power is in accordance with African religion and tradition,” and differs from the tendency of eurocentric biblical scholars to “treat the Bible more as a book of the past than as a book that speaks to the present.” The treatment of the Bible as a book of the present can be seen in Yoruba Gospel songs, where, according to Dada (2003, 273), “Jesus Christ is not just a spiritual or philosophical entity, but a dynamic personal reality in all life situations.” In view of this, Dada suggests that “the thoughts and aspirations of the people who don’t have access to advanced level of theological education should be taken seriously...in our theological formulations and discourses.” In an attempt to formulate African theology, however, care must be taken not to go into syncretism.

Some suggestions for African theology should be taken with a pinch of salt. Abioye (2003, 285–286) proposes that “ancestral veneration devoid of deception should be acceptable to Christians and non-Christians alike, as a form of ecumenical piety that is different to any sectarian confession.” Apart from the fact that ancestor veneration does not contribute to a distinctly Christian concept of God, and is therefore of dubious value for Christian education, Abioye’s suggestion that we should imbibe “the same approach to religious worship...(of) both the divinities and ancestors/ancestresses” smacks of idolatry. The same can be said of Kibicho’s declaration (1981, 36) that “we should recognize (in African Religion), as indeed in all genuine religions, and be bold enough to acknowledge, a full saving revelation.” A distinctly Christian education cannot be based on such a theological foundation.

Long ago, Kato (1985, 40-52) noted that theological issues of Africa included cultural revolution, which involves revival of pagan initiation rites and curtailing of Christian activities; African theology, which seems to be heading for syncretism and universalism; ecumenical theology which tends to relativise the Bible; and black theology, which tends to deny God’s omnipotence. It is in this light that E.O. Abogunrin (2003, 1050) cautions that “Christian scholars...should resist the attempt to equate Christ with any of them (African ancestor-heroes). The uniqueness of Christ should not be compromised in order to make any hero (ancestor) equal with Christ. The ontological and soteriological contrasts between Christ and those heroes cannot be subsumed because of the similarities.” Salvation is found only in Christ Jesus, not in African ancestors. Similarities between African and Jewish culture is no warrant to merge African Religion with the Christian faith. Nevertheless, a Christian theology (albeit in African context) is essential for Christian education. This also requires an understanding of what makes education Christian.

Christian education

Education is said to be Christian when, as Ilori (2005, 144–146) puts it, it “is an outgrowth of God’s revelation...(and) an outgrowth of the Christian worldview.” It is also Christian when the concepts are, “derived directly from sources provided by Christian theology, the Bible and Christian philosophy.” The curriculum should integrate the Bible in theory and practice, with the Bible being a vital part of the content and integrated with all subject matter. Apart from being Bible-based, it must be life-related. In the words of Semenyé (2006, 1480) “Relevant, theologically sound materials that address real-life issues need to be used. Africa must not continue to be a dumping ground for irrelevant materials from elsewhere.” Only when Christian education addresses real-life issues in Africa in a practical way will it become “a means of improving, developing and nurturing the church in its authentic walk with Christ so that the applied word of God will have a positive impact on our societies.” Teaching is the main means of addressing the issues in question.

Christians educators in Africa must realise the priority of the task of teaching in Christian ministry. As Tolbert (2000, 13) puts it, “Teaching is our ministry. Jesus is our model. People are our passion. Transformed lives are our product. And heaven is our goal. This is the essence of Christian education.” Christian educators in Africa must, like those in other parts of the world, (Tolbert 2000, 19) “make men, women and children into disciples of Jesus – learners after God’s own heart – by teaching them to love, respect, and obey God and to live their lives in accordance with biblical principles.” This necessity of teaching has been emphasised right from Bible times.

Before Moses died, he told the Israelites that the Levites would be their teachers (Deut 33:10). According to Deere (1983, 321), "The priests, of the tribe of Levi, were to teach God's precepts and law to Jacob and officiate over the worship in the tabernacle." This would lead the people to worship God and enjoy his promises (Deut 33:29). While the Bible notes that the absence of teaching led to backsliding during the reign of Asa (2 Chron 15:3), it was teaching that brought about revival in the time of Jehoshaphat (2 Chron 17: 7-9).

Most of the ministry of Christ on earth involved teaching (Jn 3:2; Mk 1:22). When he instituted what has come to be known as the Great Commission, teaching was a major factor in his instructions. Barbieri (1983, 94) says in this regard that "Jesus' commission, applicable to all His followers, involved one command, 'make disciples,' which is accompanied by three participles in the Greek: going, baptizing and teaching." Teaching was to be the major means of spreading the Gospel to the world. The result of teaching became obvious as the disciples began to use it in the early church's explosive growth (Acts 2:42-47; 11:25-26). The growth was not only numerical but in Christ-like character, as Toussaint (1983, 383) notes: "The church was continuing to grow numerically.... The significance of the name (Christians) is that people recognized Christians as a distinct group." In agreement with this line of thinking, Carlson (1998, 7-8) says, "The dynamic growth of the church during this time established teaching as a fundamental activity."

When the church later ran into the problem of false teachers who preyed on the believers' immaturity (Heb 5:11-14), teaching was the means of overcoming those problems so that the writer to the Hebrews would, in the words of Hodges (1983, 59), "pull them (the believers) dramatically forward in their Christian experience." Paul advised that teaching be used against apostasy (1Tim 4:1-6); to ensure the development of Christian character (2 Tim 2:2); and to overcome the activities of false teachers (2 Tim 4:2-5). Both the Old and the New testaments of the Bible testify to the efficacy and God's advocacy of teaching as a fundamental task for the church. The church in Africa must take recourse to teaching in order to experience tangible growth. But the African context must be closely referred to in this task.

Traditional education has not been totally replaced by modern, Western education in Africa. However, there are elements of teaching in Africa that agree with modern practice. Datta (1984, 2-3) notes the participation of teachers and students in discussion in African traditional education, which "helped to present the cultural heritage of the tribe, clan and family; to teach members of the new generation how to adapt to, control and use the environment; and to help perpetuate the institutions, laws, language and values inherited from the past." A theology of Christian education in Africa should describe how the same God that interacted with the Jews in their cultural milieu can do the same with Africans, through the agency of teaching.

Suggestions For An African Theology Of Christian Education

When Paul was in Athens, he endeavoured to lead the Athenians from worshipping the God they did not know, to knowing the God they worshipped (Acts 17:22-31). This accords with the inductive method of teaching. Gnanakan (2007, 16) says "learning is most successful when we go from the known to the unknown. A child will learn from what is already familiar to him or her then grow to absorbing additional information." An African theology of Christian education must describe how the God Africans worship through all sorts of intermediaries may be made known through the one Intermediary, Jesus Christ. Such a theology would affirm that the almighty God known to the Africans is the One who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and commanded Moses to teach the descendants of Abraham his laws. He is the One who was incarnated as the Son of God, and died for the salvation of mankind.

The early church lived in a community that resembled the communal system common in African traditional societies. It was in such communities that "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42), where "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (Acts 4:32). As "All the believers were together and had everything in common" (Acts 2:44), the result was that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

“African communalism, respect for elders and concern for the plight of others are nearer biblical value systems than western existentialist individualism. This does not mean that Christian educators must go back to advocating African Traditional Religion with non-Christian practices, but...western approaches that agree with biblical concepts and practices...should be integrated with African concepts and practices that do not contradict the Bible.” (Ango 2006, 7)

An African theology of Christian education should describe how biblical *koinonia* (κοινωνία) may be interpreted in terms familiar to Africans in their communal relationships and care giving, thus presenting to Africans the God of fellowship who enjoins and enjoys fellowship with those he has redeemed (Heb.10:25; 12:22-24).

How the needs of Africans can be met must feature prominently in the formulation of an authentic theology of Christian education. The Africans’ experience of the spirit world, their cohabitation with peoples of other faiths, and the problems of war, poverty, diseases and corruption they live with everyday need to be addressed in Christian education. It is in connection with this that Fuller (2005, 119) says,

Contextualisation of theology can only be done by new believers. They go to the Bible with their own concerns and dig out God’s answers. They organize the material in their own way. They modify their own culture by what they find there. This is absolutely necessary if the believers in the new cultures are going to be able to have churches that are not foreign to the culture but can grow and develop in direct relationship to God and pass on the faith to others.

An authentic African theology of Christian education must therefore be a contextualised theology that correctly interprets the Bible but applies it in a language understandable to the people among whom it is being interpreted, and in a way that meets the real needs of the people. Such contextualisation is best done by the people themselves. However, the culture of the people must be modified in those areas where it goes contrary to the teachings of the Bible. This necessitates a theological formulation that emphasises what specific modifications are needed, and how such modification must be done.

A theology that seeks the transformation of a people’s culture to conform to biblical precepts is in complete agreement with the way Jesus conducted his teaching ministry. Christ sought to change the way his audience thought. So he developed an intimate relationship with them, used figures of speech and narrative techniques to illustrate his teaching, and involved his audience physically, mentally and emotionally in his teaching, such as in the parable of the good Samaritan, where he dialogued with the lawyer, invited the lawyer’s comments, and instructed the lawyer to go and do what he had understood (Lk 10:25-37). There is a close relationship between Christ’s approach to teaching and the way African traditional teaching encourages audience participation.

An African theology of Christian education should describe an intention to transform thinking (Rom12:2); a close relationship between discipler and disciple (Jn 15:9-17); and a requirement that the disciples practice what they have learnt (Jn 13:15-17). African expressions that indicate change or growth, relationship or cooperation, and practice of what has been learnt will prove useful in stating such theological constructs, depending on the specific African culture within which the theology of education is being formulated.

An African theology of Christian education

This might therefore take the following form:

1. The existence of God, who is pre-existent, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient is recognized by all African societies, who worship him in various ways through various intermediaries. An African theology of Christian education would insist on acknowledging the basic awareness of Africans that the almighty God exists, and that they have a legitimate concern to seek to worship him, but God has revealed how he may be more fully known and more acceptably worshipped. This God, whom Africans worship without fully knowing, is to be revealed as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, existing in three personalities (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). He sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for the sins of the world, and to be the only acceptable Mediator between God and man. The death of Jesus on a cross is the only sacrifice accept-

able to God for the forgiveness of the sins of man. Man does not need to go through ancestral spirits who dwell in stones, trees or rivers, to approach God. Man does not need to fear spirits of nature, or demonic spirits anymore because Jesus has overcome them by his death on the cross. Jesus is our ancestor, elder, relative, sacrifice, defender and redeemer. Jesus satisfies all that Africans seek through African traditional religion, be it forgiveness of sins, appeasement of angry spirits, deliverance from poverty, disease and death, or protection against all kinds of enemies. These truths must form the content of Christian education in Africa.

2. God is love. He loves fellowship. Worshipping him involves fellowship between him and man, and between man and man. Learning about God can best be done in an atmosphere of fellowship. Just as Jesus lived in close relationship with his disciples, eating, sleeping and travelling with them, much as is done in African traditional education where teachers and students live together in close community, Christian education in Africa must be carried out in close, *koinonia* (κοινωνία) fellowship. Sharing and caring must define the relationship between teachers and students, and among the students themselves. This will not only enhance learning, but will help the students to put all they learn to practice. It will also restore the traditional African relationships of caring that have been lost through modern lifestyles. Western, existential individualism is contrary to the fellowship advocated by Christ and practised by the early church. Christian education in Africa should therefore become a means of practically demonstrating the Christian concepts of peace, honesty, conflict resolution, love and fellowship.
3. God is the provider, for it is written, "on the mountain of the Lord, he shall provide" (Gen 22:14). God is the healer, for he says, "I am the Lord who heals you" (Ex 15:26). God is the redeemer, for it is written, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you" (Is 43:1). God is the one who is able to meet all our needs and solve all our problems. God is the one who can solve the problems of poverty, disease, war, and corruption in Africa. He does this through the ministry of prayer (Js 5:13-16); stewardship (Matt 24:45-47); and integrity (2 Cor 4:2). Christian education must train believers in the habit of praying in faith, the attitude of faithful stewardship, and the practice of honesty. Christian education in Africa must train students to abhor political violence, corruption and unethical work practices, which are lifestyles abhorred in African traditional society, and were expected to be punished by African traditional gods acting for the almighty God. The God of the Bible does not need ancestral or traditional gods to punish the wicked. He has set a day when all the wicked will be brought to judgement and punished eternally, while the righteous are rewarded eternally.
4. Jesus did not leave people the way he met them. He led the Samaritan woman to understand that worship of God was not to be done at any particular location, but in the sincerity of the heart (Jn 4:21-24). He taught a lawyer the true meaning of a neighbour (Lk 10:30-37); and he showed a religious leader the difference between intellectual religious adherence and being born of the Spirit of God (Jn 3:1-8). Christian education must lead to the understanding of the difference between religious rituals, traditions and prejudices on the one hand, and spiritual rebirth, reformation and empowerment on the other. An African theology of Christian education would define the role and place of the Holy Spirit in conviction, conversion and illumination, which can be understood in terms of the African traditional power of divination, but which replaces that power and confers the power of God, "the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4) on the believer.
5. An authentic African theology of Christian education will clearly show how the Christian faith can be effectively taught in Africa, using terms familiar to Africans, acknowledging and affirming that which is good in the sight of God in African tradition, while condemning and advocating a change from that which is reprehensible in African culture and tradition, in favour of biblical lifestyles.

Conclusion

Teaching is the most potent nurturing ministry of the church. The gap between Christian profession and Christian life in Africa can only be bridged by an effective Christian teaching ministry.

The formulation of an authentic African theology of Christian education will ensure that Christian teaching in Africa is done in line with biblical content and biblical examples of teaching. The essence of a theology of teaching would be an expression of what God commands to be taught, whom he commands to do the teaching, how he commands the teaching to be done, and where he commands the teaching to be done. The objectives of the teaching would be the clear understanding of the principles of Christian life in the Bible, conviction of sin and repentance. The goals would be a people fully transformed into Christ-like lifestyles, prepared for life in heaven. This can be done successfully in Africa when theology is contextualised, and the method of communicating theology is familiar and acceptable to Africans. A contextualised theology in Africa, communicated through contextualised teaching in African societies is the essence of an authentic African theology of Christian education.

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