

In Search of African Theology

It is utterly scandalous, says John Mbiti, for so many Christian scholars in older Christendom to know so much about heretical movements in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, when so few of them know anything about Christian movements in areas of the younger churches. He accuses the Western churches of having no theological interest in the Third World, where there is also an extension of Christ's body. African theologian Mbiti, born in and raised in Kenya, and now director of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute near Geneva, has a doctorate in theology from Cambridge University and was formerly professor of religious studies at Makerere University College in Uganda.

Dr. Mbiti confronts and combats "white" Western theology. He wants to develop an African theology that reflects the contact with poor and outcast human beings, whose situation the people in the West scarcely understand; a theology that takes into account the tensions, the desires and plight of real people. Theology in Africa must be articulated from a position of a suppressed people which is enroute to liberation. Mbiti predicts that the axis of Christendom will shift from the Northern to the Southern region of the world, - centres of the church's universality will no longer be Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, Berlin, London, and 475 Riverside Drive, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila. In Africa, the rapidly growing number of Christians may force the Roman Catholic Church to elect an African pope before the end of the century - and what if the church should move her headquarters to a new Vatican in Kampala?

In his quest for an African theology, Mbiti believes that he must begin with the thinking of African peoples about God. He sees "intriguing parallels between the Biblical record and African religiosity." He believes that God must have been active among African peoples as he was among the Jewish people. Was God not present in other times and in such places as Mount Fuji and Mount Kenya, as well as Mount Sinai?

Mbiti says: "In one case the thinking and experience of the people produced a written record of God's dealings with the Jewish people in particular. In the other case no such written record exists. But God's dealings with the African people are recorded, nevertheless, in living form - oral communication, rituals, symbols, ceremonies, community faith."

He claims that the God of the Bible is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of traditional African religiosity. "Salvation history" must widen its outreach. The missionaries who brought the Gospel to Africa proclaimed the name of Jesus Christ. "But they used the name of the God," says Mbiti, "who was and is already known by African peoples - such as Mungu, Mulungu, Katinda, Ngai, Olodumare, Asis, Ruwa, Ruhanga, Jok, Modimo, Unkulunkulu and thousands more. These were not empty names. They were names of one and the same God, the creator of the world, father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Can Mbiti claim that God was and is already known by African people in their traditional religiosity? Has God revealed Himself through African traditions? In his search to develop a truly indigenous African theology, Mbiti has fallen for the temptation to separate the Old and the New Testament, and the attempt to relate the Old Testament to Scriptures and traditions of other religions. But this cannot be done. Both the Old and the New Testament in their entirety should be taken into account. Theology must take the whole of Scripture and not just a part. The whole of the Bible must be at the very foundation of any Christian theology.

Mbiti's theology is not orthodox. He doesn't recognize that all religiosity and religions must be obedient to the God of the Christian Scriptures. The line of the antithesis which runs through history is denied. Since Genesis 3:15, the unfolding of history, the struggle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan can be witnessed. The Christian faith and revelation are exclusive; all non-Christian religions are inadequate. No one can ever find salvation in the religiosity of African traditions.

We must remember the historical character of the Christian faith. The New Testament is rooted in the Old. God chose the Israelites as a vehicle of His revelation. His redemptive acts took place in Jewish history. The New Testament makes no sense unless its own claims of inherent relationship with the Old Testament are taken seriously - and is understood as such.

We read today so often about feminist, black, African, Asian, liberation theologies. What happened to Biblical theology? We should affirm that theology must be grounded in the inspired Scriptures alone. Theology is nothing more than the interpretation of what one observes in the totality of Scripture. And the task of the theologian is to articulate the Gospel in terms of the given locale and context. Of course, theology should never be a mere intellectual exercise. If the Christian gospel is the answer, one must know what the real questions are. The task of an indigenous theology is to give honest answers - derived from Scriptures - to honest questions.

In Africa, as well as everywhere else, social needs, cultural conditions appear to mold theology more than Scriptures. How many are taking seriously Calvin's conviction that Christ has power to change and transform cultures and social orders? Mbiti, and all of us, do well to remember that Christ explained to the men on the way to Emmaus about Himself - "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets" (Luke 24:27).

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