

Toward a Quest for Christian Identity: A Third World Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

It is now common knowledge that the introduction of Christianity in the Third World by various missionary agencies was an attempt to impose Western cultural values and norms thus providing political legitimacy for all forms of Western imperialism. Theo Witvliet, the Dutch theologian makes, I believe, a pertinent observation when he writes "From the beginning, the history of mission has been entangled with the history of European expansion: conversely, from the beginning the conquest of distant lands has been associated with a strong developed sense of Christian mission."¹ This is a very critical issue, and many Christians in the Third World are still recovering from this religious trauma by reevaluating the relevance of Christianity in their different sociopolitical contexts.

Therefore any serious theological discussion about the nature of Christian identity in the Third World is bound to be problematic for reasons which will become clear in this very brief statement. As I cannot speak for the entire Third World situation, my focus will be on that part of the Third World which is Africa, with special reference to the South African situa-

tion. The perspective that I wish to raise here represents the ongoing theological commitment of those of us who are members of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, a theological forum established in 1976 to encourage theological dialogue and political solidarity amongst Third World theologians.

I want to suggest that the problem of Christian identity is part of the ongoing task of theological hermeneutics. This, for me, has to do with the critical interpretation of the Christian faith in a particular historical context with the view of establishing its validity and relevance. This hermeneutical task also involves a process whereby a new sense of identity comes to be established as a perspective that gives direction or inspires action. This hermeneutical task of establishing identity is a response to the basic tenets of the Christian faith, i.e., to the tradition (*paradosis*) which is being handed on, so to speak, to those who receive it. The reception of any religious tradition always calls for interpretation which brings new insights to the nature of religious identity. Robert J. Schreier makes a very important observation when he writes:

1. Theo Witvliet, *A Place in the Sun: An Introduction to Liberation Theology in the Third World* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p 9

Tradition contributes three things to the development of human community. It provides resources for identity. It is a communication system providing cohesion and continuity in the community. It provides resources for incorporating innovative aspects into a community.²

Having made these rather general remarks about Christian identity as the ongoing task of theological hermeneutics, I want to explore very briefly how certain African and Black Theologies are addressing this problem. These efforts we see in the African and Black Theology movements. They both represent different approaches to the question of Christian identity in the African context. But they are important, as you will discover, because they are interesting examples of the process of contextualization in the African context.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AFRICAN AND BLACK THEOLOGIES AND THEIR QUEST FOR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

1. Today when we speak about the quest for Christian identity in the African (black) context we refer to the ongoing task of African and Black Theologies in their efforts to redefine the nature of the Christian mythos³ from an African and black perspective. I use the terms African and black because they represent two important hermeneutical movements within African theological scene. For over two decades African theologians in various parts of Africa have been preoccupied with the development of African theologies⁴ in an attempt to

define for themselves their understanding of the nature of African Christian identity. These efforts have examined the relation between Christianity and African traditional religions. This process of re-interpreting the Christian mythos within the African world view has challenged African theologians to examine various aspects of Christian doctrine such as God, Christ and the mission of the church. In a paper I wrote some few years back, I defined African Christian theology as a reflective understanding of the Christian faith within the African cultural religious milieu.⁵ What is implied in this definition is that serious theological reflection within the African context will have to take seriously the cultural religious context. Before Christianity came to the shores of Africa, Africans had a strong commitment to their traditional religions. These religions played a very significant role in defining who they are and the meaning of life in its totality. This is why John Mbiti makes this rather interesting comment:

Because traditional religions permeate all departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and nonreligious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion.⁶

Thus African religious cosmology provides a unique context for African theological reflection. It becomes a crucial point at which African Christians begin to articulate their commitment and establish an identity as followers of Jesus Christ. This process of

2. Robert J Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis, 1985), p 105.

3. Cf. Theodore W Jennings, Jr., *Introduction to Theology: An Invitation to Reflection upon the Christian Mythos* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

4. Cf. Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984).

5. Cf. Bonganjalo Goba, "African Christian Theology: Toward a Tentative Methodology from a South African Perspective," *JTh SA*, no. 26 (March 1979), pp 3-12.

6. John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., 1970), p 2.

theological reflection has challenged African Christians, for example, to redefine their understanding of God in favour of one which takes seriously their traditional view of God. Many current names used by African Christians for God do not reflect their traditional meaning because these were given by Western missionaries who had very little knowledge of the African religious worldview. For example, the current name for God we use in Zulu is "*Unkulunkulu*", "the greatest one," and is felt to be inadequate; yet the traditional name "*Umvelinqangi*" which means the one who is the beginning of everything, the source of life or to use Tillich's phrase, "the ground of our being," is hardly used within the African Christian community. But because of the emergence of African theology more African Christian communities are being challenged interpret the concept of God in the context of their traditional religious experience, this also applies to their views on the significance of Christ.

What is important in this process of contextualization, is that African Christians are motivated to confront their religious schizophrenia by reclaiming the basic tenets of Christianity in their particular context. Archbishop Tutu makes the same point when he writes:

The fact is that, until fairly recently, the African Christian has suffered from a religious schizophrenia. With part of her/himself s/he has been compelled to pay lip service to Christianity as understood, expressed and preached by the white man. But with an ever greater part of her/himself, a part s/he has been often ashamed to acknowledge openly and which s/he has struggled to repress, s/he has felt that his/her Africanness

was being violated. The white man's largely cerebral religion was hardly touching the depths of his/her African soul; s/he was being redeemed from sins s/he did not believe he had committed; s/he was being given answers, and often splendid answers, to questions s/he had not asked.⁷

I believe African theologies in different parts of Africa are beginning to address the issue of religious identity crisis by developing the kind of theological hermeneutic which takes seriously the Afrocentric view of life, and in so doing develops a new sense of Christian identity. What is also significant in this process is that African Christians are more conscious of the challenge of religious pluralism than their Western counterparts. Religious pluralism is not viewed as a problem, but as a fundamental fact of religious life. There is an open and dynamic view here, that religious identity is something innovative and creative in that it involves a critical re-evaluation of our religious convictions, especially in any context of religious pluralism. African Christian identity, in other words, evolves out of this pluralism, in which there is a creative dialogue between contrasting and yet complementary religious worldviews. Interesting examples of this creative dialogue can be seen in many attempts by African theologians to develop relevant christologies for their churches.⁸

2. The other important contribution to this quest for Christian identity we encounter in the Black Theology movement both here in the United States and in South Africa. My own work as a theologian has been greatly influenced by this movement. Black theology is an attempt by Black Christians to reinterpret the Christian faith

7. Desmond M Tutu, "Whither African Theology?" in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, eds., Edward Fashole-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings, and Godwin Tasiie (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p 366.

8. Cf. Siggibo Dwane, "Christology and Liberation," *JTh SA*, No 35 (June), pp 29-37.

in the context of Black religious experience. It is a theology whose basic hermeneutic expresses the challenge of being black in a context of white institutional racism. This exciting black theological hermeneutic is a response to the challenge of black power here in the USA and black consciousness in South Africa. It is a theology whose point of departure is the experience of oppression in which there is a positive reaffirmation of our black Christian identity. This point is made also by Boesak!

It is no longer possible for black Christians to escape these pressing questions: how can one be black and Christian? What has faith in Jesus Christ to do with the struggle for black liberation?⁹

This quest for black identity in the black power movement and black consciousness movements becomes a hermeneutical key to unlocking the depth and richness of the black religious experience. It is a redefinition of black personhood, by black Christians that authenticates their faith in Jesus Christ. The reality of blackness becomes the basic expression of our obedience to the imperatives of the gospel. Therefore black theological reflection becomes the vehicle or channel through which black Christian identity is established.¹⁰

What we see in both these efforts to redefine the nature of Christian identity, is a commitment to take seriously the challenge of being African and black in the world. It is to give the Christian mythos a new interpretation which is rooted in our Africanness as well as our blackness.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Any identity is anchored in a particular social context or in a specific set of social relations. This point has been well developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*.¹¹ That identity formation process involves a dialectical relationship between the individual and society really implies that we become who we are as a result of a particular form of socialization in which there are always competing claims of meaning and negative power relationships. These competing claims of meaning within a particular sociopolitical context lead to the development of critical consciousness. It is in this context that one begins to appreciate the political significance of the conflict of interpretations about the nature of social reality.

I believe this conflict of interpretations about the nature of social reality goes on also within religious communities as they seek to be faithful to the imperatives of the gospel. In this context claims to religious authenticity do not only necessitate conflict in a general sense, but may also lead to schism. I want to suggest for our discussion that claims to religious authenticity in many Third World Christian communities are approached in terms of (a) new forms of spirituality, (b) critical involvement in struggles for justice and peace, and (c) a new theological method.

When African theologians engage in the theological task of reclaiming the basic tenets of the Christian faith, they are rejecting the kind of colonial Chris-

9. Allan Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence, A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Power* (Orbis Books, 1977), p 40.
10. Cf. Bonganjalo Goba, *An Agenda for Black Theology, Hermeneutics for Social Change* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1988). In this book I try to address the problem of Christian identity from a black theological perspective.
11. Cf. Peter Berger, Thomas Lukman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchorbook, 1967).

tianity which was imposed on them. This rejection, as I have noted before, represents a projection of a new Christian identity, one which takes seriously the African holistic view of life steeped both in the cultural values and traditional religious practices of the people. It is in this context that we appreciate the exciting revitalization of the Christian faith as one which is not foreign but speaks to the very heart of the Christian community. This hermeneutic regrounding of the Christian tradition within the African world view does not only promote a new sense of African Christian identity but becomes the *sine qua non* of the new kind of spirituality in the African context. There can be no authentic presence of the church without this new sense of African Christian identity in Africa. Theo Witvliet makes a very perceptive comment in this regard:

Anyone who reflects on how long and how fundamentally the autonomy of the African has been undermined and trampled on by systematic contempt and mockery of his/her culture and religion will recognize the inevitability of a reaction which acknowledges the value of those traditions and even glorifies them. This reaction creates the necessary self-respect which is the indispensable condition for the search for a new liberating identity.¹²

The other important contribution to this critical task of identity formation, I believe takes place in black theological reflection. It is a reaffirmation of our God-given task to challenge racist oppression on the basis of our faith in Jesus Christ. In a situation where our black identity is threatened and subjected to oppressive structures, black theological reflection becomes the basis for developing a critical con-

sciousness, one which exposes the contradictions of our society. Our blackness becomes a point of departure for theological reflection. What authenticates this kind of theological reflection is a commitment to the struggle for liberation, as we strive to dismantle the system of apartheid. We are challenged to expose contradictions in our everyday social life, as well as to discover our true black identity. For those of us who by choice are Christians, this identity is rooted in our black religious experience. There is a sense here in which our involvement in the struggle for liberation is shaped by who we are and at the same time defines who we are.

The quest for Christian identity is a dynamic process which evolves as Christians reinterpret the gospel in a particular context. It can never be a finished product but always invites another critical theological reflection. In the Third World this sense of Christian identity is forged in the struggles for cultural and religious authenticity as we have observed in Africa. It is also forged in the various struggles for liberation, especially in South Africa and many parts of the Third World. What is unique about this quest for Christian identity as part of the theological task, is that faith is validated by praxis. In other words, what is at stake here is not the challenge of orthodoxy but of orthopraxis. Dermot Lane makes a relevant point in this regard:

Linked to this praxis-centered understanding of knowledge is the presence of an equally different view of what constitutes the truth. In many traditional epistemologies, such as empiricism or critical realism, the mode of truth which is operative is one of disclosure. In the praxis-centered understanding of knowledge the

12. Witvliet, *A Place in the Sun*, p 90.

model of truth is one of transformation. Truth is perceived in the experience of social transformation.¹³

I believe this praxis-centered theological approach has interesting methodological implications for the Christian identity formation process in any given sociopolitical context. Theological reflection for me is very much connected with the Christian identity formation process which begins with the basic experience of oppression. Governed by a hermeneutic of suspicion, it unravels the contradictions in our life through a critical process of social analysis. It is in this task of social analysis as we engage in the struggle for liberation that we acquire new self-understanding. This process is sometimes referred to as conscientization. But social analysis is not sufficient to bring about this new

sense of Christian identity alone; it must be accompanied by critical theological reflection, which involves a reappropriation of the basic affirmations of the Christian faith as decisive in shaping our praxis in a particular context. This praxis-centered theological approach which arises out of our commitment redefines who we are in the struggle and at the same time is based on our faith. Christian praxis offers an interesting alternative to any discussion about the quest for Christian identity. Feminist, black and Third World liberation theologies are all interesting examples of the different approaches to the notion of Christian identity and all address the problem of religious particularity and theological inquiry in a public context from the perspective of the underside of history.

13. Dermot A. Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology: Praxis, Process and Salvation* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, Ltd., 1984), p 73.