

Reading the African context

Author:

 Musonda Bwalya^{1,2}
Affiliations:
¹Department of Systematics and Ethics, United Church of Zambia Theological College, Zambia

²Research associate, Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Musonda Bwalya

Email:

m_bwalya@yahoo.com

Postal address:

PO Box 20429, Kitwe, Zambia

Dates:

Received: 02 July 2012

Accepted: 01 Oct. 2012

Published: 06 Dec. 2012

How to cite this article:

 Bwalya, M., 2012, 'Reading the African context', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33(2), Art. #762, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v33i2.762>
Note:

This article was offered for publication in honour of Prof. Etienne De Villiers, a distinguished scholar of our times, who will be remembered for his passion for the birth of a moral economy and a moral society. This article was originally presented at a gathering of the Council of World Mission Africa (CWM) Round-Table which was convened at Wasawange Lodge in Livingstone, Zambia, from 19 to 21 November 2011.

Dr Musonda Bwalya is the Principal of United Church of Zambia Theological College in Kitwe, Zambia and holds a PhD (Social Sciences: Doctor of Philosophy with a focus on Social Ethics, African Studies and Development Economics Thought) from Pretoria University in South Africa. He studied under Prof. De Villiers, ethicist, and Prof. James Blignaut, economist, from 1998 to 2001.

There is so much alienation, pain and suffering in our today's world. In this vein, African Christianity, a voice amongst many voices, should seek to be a transformational religion for the whole of life, affecting all facets of human life towards a fuller life of all in Africa. This article sought to highlight and point to some of the major societal challenges in the African context which African Christianity, as a life-affirming religion, should continue to embrace, re-embrace and engage with, if it has to be relevant to the African context. In this vein, the article argued that a correct reading of the African context would lead to a more relevant theory and praxis of African Christianity for the benefit of all African peoples and their global neighbours. The contention of this article was that African Christianity has a significant role to play in the re-shaping of the African society and in the global community of humans, only that this role must be executed inclusively, responsibly and appropriately, together with all those who seek the holistic development of Africa towards one common destiny.

Introduction

I have deliberately chosen to present something about 'Reading the African context', to help those engaged in the theory and praxis of African Christianity to reposition themselves to have a firmer grasp of some of the challenges of our times in Africa and to help them begin to re-construct theologies and ethics of life for all God's people.

This is a demonstration of a deep appreciation for the work of Prof. De Villiers, who, in his active academic career, spanning over 40 years, chose to engage with some of these contemporary theological and ethical issues such as ethics in the public arena and economic justice for all. I can vouch for this distinguished and one of the most thorough scholars – that he used to bring forth a unique, solid, rigorous and life-affirming Christian ethical thinking to bear on these issues. He is indeed a soft-spoken and humble scholar, but a towering figure who contributed greatly to the development of the science of ethics in Africa.

As a student of comparative African studies and ethics, rather than re-inventing the wheel, I have deliberately chosen to present some excerpts from five chapters picked from an on-going study on 'Religion, Politics and Development in the African context', which I am undertaking. This academic and practical study started during my sabbatical in Boston Massachusetts in 2008 and I have been keenly following events on our continent, sanguinely reading and optimistically interpreting signs of the times that, one day Africa will recapture her lost glory.

It is my hope that this presentation will stimulate our minds, help us pull out salient contextual features, correctly read the African context and strengthen our resolve and Christian calling to adequately respond to some of the pertinent challenges of our times in this beautiful continent of ours, 'mother Africa'.

The focus of this presentation will be on the following key issues from this study:

- the Christian religion and the African context
- authentic ecclesial identity
- creative encounter with the Western world
- economic globalisation and struggle for African existence
- African Leadership and African Churches as 'Instruments for socio-politico-economic critique.'

The Christian religion and African context

There is no doubt that a lot has happened in Africa since the gospel about Jesus Christ was first sounded. In this section, we shall try to explore the impact of this on the continent which has gone through so many challenges and we shall seek to point to the movement towards the evolution

Copyright: © 2012. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

of theologies of transformation which is essential in handling such challenges of our times.

Africa has changed and is faced with a number of problems of modernity, ranging from the rise of tropical diseases and crises of foods (Masango 2010:175–177; Mombo 2010:173–74). In such a context, African Christianity is indeed at the crossroads, a point at which she needs to decide which way to go and show the way on how to reach her set objectives. African Christianity cannot afford to confuse itself or simply give up on its agenda. The religion has to decide to move forward and do this in a focused and well-managed way insofar as the execution of its mission and the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of its theologies are concerned. Already, in the African context, in spite of these many challenges, there are positive and laudable signs which are taking place in Africa. For example, the democratic process is being consolidated in many African countries and there are increased peer-review mechanisms among African nations. With such situations, African Christianity should indeed take a lead and contribute its share in meeting these challenges of our times head-on and seek for more positive and just solutions to pressing challenges of our times. Nonetheless, it should not have a 'know-it-all' attitude towards others, but seek to cooperate with other well-meaning groups and organisations which seek for Africa's peace, well-being, harmony and development.

The role of African Christianity in the transformation of the continent of Africa, that is *commutatio* – change, alteration, shift and reversal – of Africa for the better, cannot be over emphasised. The vitality and richness of African life must be reclaimed by African Christianity and used in the continued propagation of the Christian gospel. African Christianity must be more innovative and creative in its mission and task. Its role in the transformation, *commutatio*, of the continent must extend to the whole gamut of change (Bwalya 2001), from individual lives to corporate lives, from social life to political life, from economic life to environmental life, and so on. It is not that African Christianity will take on too much, but that it should be concerned with the whole of life and seek common solutions to common problems, as Africa charts its own destiny. African Christianity should seek the strengthening of nation states, the democratic process, the rule of law, respect for human rights, the protection of life and property, the preservation of the environment, increased inter-faith dialogue, increased protection of citizens from terrorism, hunger and all forms of dehumanisation. How to go about this is probably the most difficult task. However, it has to carry out its task and the 'how' is on-going and could include such things as policy-oriented measures and means which aim at changing public policies on such as participation in civil society events, government lobbying, public consultations, written and oral social critiques, litigations and non-violent public protests, on behalf of the people.

People of Africa have been under socio-politico-economic brutalisation for a long time – close to four centuries now –

and are tired and in need of total liberation from captivity, backwardness, underdevelopment and repression of all sorts. African Christianity, a resident religion in modern Africa, can offer that hand of liberation to all Africans, in collaboration with other people of good will.

African Christianity has that opportunity, in these uncertain and capricious times, to be more involved – in word and in deed – in the holistic transformation of the continent. Thus demonstrating that its task is not just inward, to serve the needs of the Christians and expand its evangelical programs, but that its task is equally outward: that is to say, its other task is to serve the needs of all African peoples out there in the wider communities of Africa, without discrimination or exclusion.

Therefore, theologies of transformation in Africa, that is, critical and systematic reflections on the historical praxis of African Christianity oriented to *commutatio*, should ensure that the plight of all children of Africa – men, women and their young ones – is articulated expeditiously, clearly, coherently and in a life-affirming way. It is expected that theologies of transformation – critical and systematic reflections on *commutatio* – should effectively and efficiently contribute to an affirmation and the enhancement of the whole of life as God intended.

The broad methodology of these reflections must be essentially phenomenological: faithful to actual data, critical in analysis of data, creative and true to life-affirming interpretation of data, and passionate about life-changing action or application of data. But this methodology must always be contextual, aiming at the holistic liberation of the African person and the sanguine expression of Christianity in African thought forms and idioms, and articulating real issues such as neo-colonialism, political instability, ethnicity and exclusion of female voices from development paradigms at the expense of female humanity. Here one notes great African Christian thinkers who have contributed to the emergence of African Christian thought which one should continually interact with as one seeks fresh new ways of elucidating the meaning of *commutatio* in Africa in the light of the *evangel* of Christ today. These include John Mbiti, John Pobee, Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Charles Nyamiti, Manas Buthelezi, Harry Sawyer, T. Tshibangu, Kwesi Dickson and Kofi Appiah-Kubi (Parrat 1987a,1987b).

These theologies of *commutatio* ought to deliberately and decisively contribute to the day when Africa, east-west, north-south – to use the phraseology of the first President of Zambia, African freedom fighter, elder statesman and father of the nation of Zambia, Dr Kenneth David Kaunda – will celebrate fuller lives for all Africans, when each African will have enough to eat, clothe with, live in and actualise in.

What a great day that will be and theologies of transformation will reach the status of theologies of life, for the service of humanity, to God's own glory who promises life for all and in all. And when all humanity rises up to preserve life, life

will not be destroyed, but life will be nourished, cherished and passed on from generation to generation in resounding victory, joy, celebration and great fulfilment which astound time and space.

Authentic ecclesial identity

In this section, I shall focus on the question of how the Christian community and other like-minded people can contribute to the emergence of an authentic ecclesial identity, that is, the true self-understanding of who the African church is and what her historic role is within the continent of Africa and beyond. To help the readers contribute to this, I shall focus on the following namely: dealing with 'authentic ecclesial identity' and lessons from the African Instituted Churches (AICs).

Dealing with authentic ecclesial identity

The African church ought to have her own identity which is not pretentious, but true to the hopes and aspirations of the *homo Africanus*. There is no need to pretend that because she was 'birthed' by later-day European or Western missionaries she is European or Western. Although she shares in the Jewish-Christian heritage which is largely underpinned by Western culture, she has to be bold enough and affirm that she has her own unique 'personality' and 'spirit', and demonstrate that she is true to who she is and true to her self-understanding, and faithful to the historic witness of the land and the people of Africa. Most important, she must serve the real needs of African people in ways which are contextual, meaningful and life-affirming. This is the only way she will contribute authentically to the global church.

The author calls the quest for authentic ecclesial identity in Africa the 'crux of the matter'. Unless churches in Africa know who they are, what they can be and their unique contribution, they cannot handle the challenges of our times.

Churches in Africa should attempt to interpret the biblical message from the standpoint of who they, as African churches, are. They should not espouse an imposition of biblical hermeneutics as mediated through the spectacles of Westerners. It is not that they cannot learn from Western brothers and sisters, but they should pay attention to the history, experience, faith and aspirations of African people. In their quest for true identity, they should ask relevant questions, for example: what does it mean to be an African who follows the biblical message? What does it mean to be an African Christian amidst rapid change and suffering?

Further, in their search for identity, they should move away from biblical superficiality, fundamentalism and literalism (Parrat 1987a:143–157). That is, every effort should be made to make use of appropriate linguistic and critical tools that can help to bring home the relevant message of the Bible to an African soul. Coupled to this, should be the desire to redefine the nature and task of theological education in Africa so that it embraces discoveries in other social and human sciences

as well as in the natural sciences. Thus empowering the soul of the *homo Africanus* on the continent of Africa to begin to appreciate God's redemptive agenda to humankind and enable this soul to apply it to his or her peculiar context. This, however, will not mean a negation of oral sources and ordinary theological experiences and reflections from ordinary Christians who may not have a formal education. This process should be inclusive of and accommodate faith-stories of all Africans in the sub-region – allowing for a cross-fertilisation of theological ideas and experiences. If this is allowed to occur simultaneously, then we shall see the birth of Churches in Africa which embrace the totality of the humanity of the *homo Africanus* and celebrate the whole of life – in ritual, song, dance and word – in a language and style which is authentically African.

This is one of the greatest challenges, if not the most significant challenge, which confronts churches in Africa.

The imperative of the quest for authentic ecclesial identity in Africa is that churches should desire to be true to who they are. This process, already noted above, involves an honest interpretation of who they are, African ecclesiological hermeneutics, based on sound appropriation of the biblical truth which engages creatively with social, human and natural sciences, and which takes seriously the mundane theological ideas and experiences of Africans. It is only in this way that they can minister to the very needs of African Christians and converts, which include African community and African hospitality in their diverse manifestations, within Africa. This will also work for the benefit of all citizens of Africa.

The point is, that an institution, which understands its identity, will be able to execute its role or task in society in an excellent way. Identity and task in human history are inextricably linked.

Lessons from African Instituted Churches (AICs)

In order to strengthen the movement towards reclaiming the African ecclesial identity, the African church must be ready to draw lessons from the African Instituted Churches (AICs) that in many respects has tried to contextualise the Christian faith.

Broadly speaking, AICs broke away from mainline missionary churches due to *inter alia* the dissatisfaction with the way in which African church members were being treated by certain missionaries who had racist and discriminatory tendencies. They set up their own independent churches, usually under a charismatic leader.

These could be divided into the following categories (Chuba 2008:50ff), namely:

- Ethiopian: with an emphasis on separation due to political reasons.
- Zionist: with an emphasis on the appointed place of worship and final deliverance, similarly to the biblical

Zion and with an emphasis on healing and the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church and in an individual's life.

- Messianic: with an emphasis on the coming of the Messiah and the need for spiritual preparation.

From the time of their foundation almost 80 years ago, they have become very formidable forces, for example, the Zion Christian Church of South Africa which is considered to be the richest church in South Africa, if not Africa, and the Aladura Churches of Nigeria, considered to be the most international AIC in Africa. The AICs are forces to be reckoned with and they continue to provide service in the area of healing, fecundity and prosperity, as they proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God in the foreseeable future.

Chuba (2008:51) observes that the contributions of AICs to Christianity include:

- Placing high value on the unbreakable bond between the living and the ancestors (the living dead).
- Putting a self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating mechanism into place.
- Belief in and practice of spiritual healing and prophecy, dreams and visions.
- Celebration of lively worship and sacraments, with full congregational participation, belief in 'anytime as a time of prayer' and fervent prayers.
- Strict devotion to Bible reading and Bible study.

Chuba (2008) further observes that:

Independent Churches [AICs] are without weakness. Nevertheless, these weaknesses can be put in the right course if the orthodox churches can be willing to listen to the voice and language of Independent Churches, accept to learn some useful methods and practice from them and help them where help is necessary. (p. 51)

The movement towards the ecclesial identity in Africa can only be sustained when African churches decisively put in place a program which supports this process, for example, as outlined above. The African church has a unique contribution to make; only this has to evolve from a true and unpretentious understanding of who the African church is and what her historic role is.

Creative encounter with the Western world

The creative encounter with the Western world was mediated through the missionary movement. This encounter has had a lasting impact on the culture of the Africans. In this section, I trace this impact and point to what the African church can do to contribute to the emergency of African authenticity and a better life for all Africans.

A critical assessment of Westernisation and its legacy

As already noted, significant progress in the Christianisation of sub-Saharan Africa begins in the 19th century, soon after the European revivalist movement of the 18th century (Groves 1948). There is credible evidence to suggest that

by the beginning of the last century, mainline churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, Reformed Churches, and the Methodist Churches, were well established, from Senegal to Kenya, and from Mali to South Africa (Isichei 1995).

Those Africans who were converted during this period were mainly Negroid and Bantu-speaking people who shared a common ancestry, culture, religiosity and social organisation (Mbiti [1975] 1991). It is a fact, they did not completely shed off their peculiar humanness or African ethos as they sought to be faithful Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans and so on. As already noted, those who felt very dissatisfied broke off from mainline churches and formed their own African-initiated Churches – the AICs.

Apart from spiritual re-awakening based on the Jewish-Christian heritage, the other major contribution of missionary churches to society in Africa was in the area of education delivery. In fact, education – through schools and colleges – was used primarily by missionaries as a tool for evangelisation (Ragsdale 1996; Bwalya 2001). Most of the leaders of the old stock and architects of the freedom struggle especially in sub-Saharan Africa – including Hastings Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, Houphouet-Boigny of Ivory Coast, Nkwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Augustino Neto of Angola, Seretse Khama of Botswana, Kenneth David Kaunda of Zambia and Samora Machel of Mozambique were beneficiaries of the missionary education.

It is probably the content of this education according to Western terms, which was going to be decisive in the creation of the modern African society. This is because even though missionary education was meant to prepare African minds for the reception of the gospel truth, it is undeniable that it mediated Western ethos and incarnated this in the lives of African peoples and their descendants forever (Bwalya 2000). Undeniably, Africans came to love and embrace a Western identity, sometimes without critical questioning. Each colonised country loved to be associated with the language, life-style and culture of the colonial powers. In most cases, this was at the expense of giving up one's identity, soul and destiny to somebody – leading to the loss of the African birthrights. The result was the birth of the *homo Africanus*, who shared in both Western and African values, for better or for worse, who struggled between allegiance to his or her history and experience and that of the foreign powers that were.

The point the author is making is that in talking about churches in the sub-Saharan Africa in historical witness, one should be aware of two things namely: churches – through the missionary enterprise – have contributed to the Christianisation process and they have equally contributed to the birth of the modernisation process. Both of these movements, *Christianisation* and *modernisation*, were based on a very strong Western heritage embodied in Western people who did not always fully appreciate African history

and experience. This double-faced historical fact cannot be ignored in our bid to highlight the challenges which are faced by churches in Africa.

Africa's encounter with the Western world on the one hand and her encounter with the middle-Eastern or Asian world on the other hand, which make her a laboratory of the world is well documented (Bediako 1995:252–267). Most important and for our purposes, Africa's encounter with the Western world is a well-known fact and has become part of Africa's creedal statement, that: *when Africa's forefathers got settled in Africa, they were later colonised by the 'Bazungus' (Bantu word for White people)*. The Portuguese visits along the west coast of Africa, the coast of Angola, at the Cape and along the Mozambican coast in the 15th century left a trail of human and psychological disaster which prepared the way for the diabolical traffic in humans and laid the foundation for the colonisation of the African continent (cf. Baur 1994). The taking-over of the Cape by the Dutch in the 16th century paved the way for the inner colonisation of the continent, especially southern and central Africa.

To illustrate this in the case of the southern African sub-region: by the end of the 19th century, the British, after their bloody defeat at the hands of the descendants of the Dutch in South Africa, had set themselves as a sub-regional super power (cf. Isichei 1995). About the same time, the Germans and the French also started to exert their power on the sub-region. With the confirmation of the rape of Africa through the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, by the beginning of last century the sub-region was divided into the following colonial spheres of influence, namely: Angola and Mozambique under the Portuguese; Namibia under the Germans (and later under the Afrikaners, descendants of the Dutch); Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia under the British; South Africa under the British and later under the Afrikaners (popularly known in Bantu language as 'amabunu' – the Boers in Afrikaans); Madagascar, Reunion, the Comoro Islands under the French and Mauritius and Seychelles under both the British and French influences (Baur 1994). The result is that for more than 50 years of the last century, the sub-region was a colonised entity and shared the British, French, Afrikaner and Portuguese cultures. The challenges which this encounter brought about are still with us today. The same can be said for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

These challenges include the search for suitable notions of political rule and democracy (as shall be alluded to later), the erosion of traditional culture, the depletion of the authority of local chiefs and kings and the central issue of appropriate development paradigms for the African continent. In short, the process of decolonisation which was put in place by Africa's forefathers during Africa's struggle for emancipation and self-rule almost 60 year ago, has not yet finished. The soul of the sub-region should be liberated – socially, culturally, morally, economically, religiously and politically. This is in order to give a chance to citizens of this great continent to evolve their own institutions and destinies which will reflect who they are (identity), their values (moral life), their ideology (belief systems) and their historic task (function).

These challenges should be on the faith and witness agenda of the churches in Africa. The churches should help society name the chaff of the past colonial experience and history, and encourage African peoples to be proud of who they are and chart their own destinies based on all the resources God has endowed them with, within them and around them.

Churches in the sub-region should be bold enough to speak against the colonisation and recolonisation of the *homo Africanus*. They should see themselves as 'counter-colonial churches', which uphold and promote the dignity of Africans, their rights and freedoms. In this regard, more practical and concerted ways and means should be put in place to explain to the most ordinary of African peoples what it means for God to disclose that perfect love in Jesus Christ for all humanity. This is a way of answering to these challenges.

The continental search for African authenticity

Mercy Amba Aduyoye of Ghana gave a very sharp call for African authenticity when she delivered her timely paper titled 'A Letter to my Ancestors' at the 1998 World Council of Churches 8th Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, and summarised it as follows:

We yearn to be authentic, we yearn to discover the strength with which you resisted total obliteration of what you had received from your forbears and indeed of the total annihilation of our kind from this soil. We yearn to rediscover your wisdom, for who knows but that we may glean insights and inspiration for our contemporary struggles and dilemmas for we too resist total absorption into something to say to us. (Aduyoye 2005:xv)

Aduyoye's sharp cry for authenticity is a continental cry for a return to basics and a return to traditional insights which should be brought to bear on contemporary life and living. In the words of Aduyoye (2005:xvff.), it is a call to:

- Live in harmony with themselves as Africans and with the rest of creation.
- Real peace and resistance of the imposition.
- To take a 'critical distance' from local cultures which we find dehumanising.
- Refuse degrading female typology.
- Pan-Africanism.
- Responsible economics.
- Most important: Conversion and commitment ('A return to ourselves as we turn to God so we can move forward with integrity').

Aduyoye has laid it bare: if Africa wants to move forward to authenticity, it has to decide to deal with those things that have hindered it, shake them off and find inspiration in the wisdom of the forbears, as it learns to deal with the intricacies of modernity.

Quest for suitable notions of political rule and democracy

About this Bediako (1995:235) observes: Christianity has been an active participant in the struggle to regain the independence of Africa. It is the argument of this chapter that African Christianity – now with greater consciousness of its

identity and character – may face an even greater challenge to be of service to Africa in the political realm.

One of the major tasks of African Christianity is to contribute to the movement from political independence to democracy (Bediako 1995:236). It is not that it should be patterned after the Western model, but that Africans themselves should move away from authoritarianism and allow for dissenting voices and groups in ways that are suitable to African conditions and culture. As Bediako (1995:245–249) has put it: African Christianity should contribute to the process of the desacralization of political power in African society, that is, the process of stripping it of any pretensions of ultimacy and recognition of the fact that true power and authority is located in and comes from God.

Armed with the gospel of Jesus Christ for service, African Christianity must go forward to put Africa's concerns high on the agenda and contribute to the engendering of practical solutions that serve humanity. Bediako (1995) puts it succinctly:

The major challenges now facing the Christian churches in Africa in the political sphere is to raise to consciousness in the wider society the connection between the Church's message of righteousness, love and justice, and the search for sustainable democratic governance. (p. 249)

But most important, this movement must begin in the African church. The church in Africa must be seen to set an example towards appropriate governance styles and democratisation which allow for different opinions, dissent, disagreement and a reconciled existence, in a healthy and life-affirming way.

The African church can regain her authentic ecclesial identity and help the continent move towards a positive creative encounter with the Western world. One of the key areas of contributions will be in the area of political rule, to ensure that Africa moves towards very strong democratic principles and institutions, accountability in the private and public spheres, the rule of law and a peaceful coexistence.

Economic globalisation and the struggle for African existence

Economic globalisation, defined broadly by this author as the sucking of national and regional economies into one integrated global economic system, and defined diversely by experts of economics, is a vital challenge which confront society at large, including churches, on the continent of Africa. This challenge largely accounts for the socio-politico-economic chaos in Africa which has endured to this day (Bwalya 1998). This is because Africa, though a participant in global trade, does not gain sufficiently and significantly from the arrangement at all (All Africa Conference of Churches [AACC] 2007). In this regard, it is a matter that needs attention.

Africa cannot deny the benefits of economic globalisation such as improved communication systems and infrastructure, in

some cases. Nonetheless, one cannot turn a blind eye to some incidences of injustice such as cases of trade inequalities, economic injustice and domination, which hide behind the veil of economic globalisation through the global market (Heibroner 1988; Bwalya 1998; AACC 2007).

Senzeni Zokwana, President of the International Chemicals, Energy and Mining Federation, recently observed during his visit to Zambia that globalisation has made Africa a dumping ground, has brought nothing to workers in Africa, except unemployment and has made African farmers not to compete favourably with their Western counterparts (The Post 09 February 2004:2). How to correct this situation is one of the biggest challenges of African leaders.

The author notes, with joy, some of the recent policy pronouncements about the development prospects of regional economic organisations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), in, for example, the areas of tourism development along the Zambezi corridor. However, speaking of the Southern Africa sub-region, as an illustration, it is disheartening to note that the sub-region which is endowed with so much beauty, resources and resilience, still has very large pockets of poverty.

Poverty is Africa's problem. The world out there does not owe Africa a living. Africa must decide to develop and seek to liberate herself from political to economic liberation, on its own terms (Otieno & McCullum 2005:28–58). As Otieno and McCullum (2005) have rightly observed, Africa must reconstruct her self and move her economy towards sustainability and inclusive development. And two key non-negotiables in this development process are: the protection of the people and the protection of the earth (World Council of Churches 2006:7–27).

There should be deliberate efforts by Africa towards evolving development paradigms which use local resources¹ and develop these into finished goods. Unlike what is happening where foreign countries – especially China with its appetite for raw materials – has come into Africa as a new superpower to buy raw materials for its own industries, its own people and its own economic growth, at the expense of Africa's economic development.

As Africa attempts to liberate herself from economic ills and moves towards true self-hood, she is being hindered by the emergence and re-emergence of tropical diseases. If this is not attended to expeditiously, all the development gains of the past decades will be lost. The case in point is the incidence of HIV and AIDS (Mahlangu-Ngchobo 2010:471–476; Phiri 2010:477–488; Mundle 2010:489–493), which threatens to ruin development prospects in Africa. It is as though the continent of Africa, which has the highest rate of infection, is engulfed in a war for survival. The Rev.

1.The idea of 'Growth from Own Resource' was mooted by Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia at the height of Zambia's economic woes in the late 1980s and was crushed by the donor community who were opposed to local economic initiatives that were aimed at changing the master-servant mentality of the Bretton Woods which mainly benefited rich countries at the expense of poor ones such as Zambia (Bwalya 2001).

Bishop Dr Mvume Ndandala, former General Secretary of the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) observed during his keynote address during the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation 2004 Graduation Ceremony in October in Kitwe, Zambia, that any disease that is able to infect children before they reach their reproductive age has the ability to obliterate continents and replace them with other people. So the call for the preservation of generations is not far-fetched, but timely as Africa charts out the economic development agenda.

The African church should rise to the occasion and support continental efforts aimed at ensuring that Africa gains from her own natural resources in a globalised world, and deals head-on with obstacles to development, such as disease. This movement is dependent on how the African church will use her spiritual heritage based on service for all, how she will contribute to the responsible use of Africa's resources, how she will support local and home-grown economic initiatives and how she will support the process of getting positive 'gleanings' from the international community, for the development of the peoples of Africa in every way.

The choice to sound and sustainable economic development lies in the hands of Africa and all continental movements and organisations such as the African church.

African leadership and African churches as 'instruments of socio-politico-economic critique'

Corrective and remedial measures are dependant on governments of Africa. Unless these governments move forward, the development of Africa will be a pipe dream.

Political power should not be attained just for the sake of it. It should be attained in order to help African societies move forward. And those who aspire for political leadership at any level, ought to see themselves as servant-leaders accountable to the people (Bwalya 2001). Unfortunately, one does not see a lot of sacrifice from our political leadership in Africa, except when this sacrifice helps them to benefit materially and financially. A scenario like this is best described as a 'leadership crisis'. It is against natural law to see political leaders trot from place to place, happy and satisfied, while their citizens sink deeper into waters of poverty (Bwalya 1998). The World Bank report on Africa's Social Indicators (1999:1ff.) painted a gloomy picture for the sub-region concerning development prospects at the beginning of this century, with reduced life expectancy, high mortality rates and increased disease, *inter alia*.

What Africa needs now is a new creative, energetic and visionary leadership which can 'save' the continent of Africa from its perennial ills of poverty, disease and ignorance (Mombo 2010:173–174), premised on the rich African leadership style of community-based, consensus-building and grass-roots involvement from the village to the chief and from chief to the village (Chuba 2008:20–23). This is

as much a challenge for a political leadership as it is for churches in Africa. The rebirth of new leadership should also be exemplified and seen in churches – a kind which can positively influence the political leadership towards stronger states which respect human rights and freedoms, the rule of law and the democratic process! In this process, the women leaders should be fully empowered so that they can give and share their unique motherly and caring traits of leadership with all people.

In this regard, churches in Africa *should inculcate a renewed philosophy of life that says that economic well-being is an Africa task and is dependent on how well we use what God has given us for the benefit of people*. It has everything to do with re-examining our education and cultural paradigms and ask questions, such as: in what ways have they contributed to our stagnation? How can education and culture positively impact on our development paradigms? The author believes that the God of Africa and the entire universe is the God of creativity *par excellence*. As children of Africa, made in the very image of the God of their ancestors and of all humanity, Africans should make use of this innate, godlike-capacity of creativity to create and recreate, *inter alia*, good agricultural and environmental practices, food stores and strong political institutions, for all of Africa's well-being. The point is that God our creator *par excellence* has put all things into the soil, rivers, mountains and vegetation of the continent to enable Africans to excel and move towards an adequate continental holistic development. It is up to the African leadership to inspire Africans, Christian and non-Christian alike, to use the political will and power to achieve Africa's noble and sacred task of making Africans whole again.

To enhance this process, churches in Africa should see themselves as the 'means of socio-politico-economic critique.' Gutierrez (1973:37) sees this as a process of liberation, one which expresses the aspirations of the oppressed peoples and social classes, one which understands history and leads to the creation of new men and women and a qualitatively different society, and one which leads to biblical sources which inspire the present action of humans in history. With Christ they should be involved in the critical questioning of society, politics and the economic development process, within the continent which is prone to human injustice and corruption (Otieno & McCullum 2005:73–88). This criticism should not degenerate into utter and unnecessary societal political and economical judgement, as if there is nothing one can affirm in society. Instead this critical stance should contribute to the building of more just and friendly societal, political and economic structures within which Africans and their guests can contribute their share to the holistic development. Churches in Africa should be prepared to be prophetic, that is, meet 'head-on' structures of injustice and unfairness which perpetuate economic enslavement and leadership scandals. But this should be balanced by a very strong policy-oriented approach that understands what is happening in government and society and which contributes to the wise and responsible formulation of public policy for the betterment of all people.

As already noted in other sections, Africans are tired of a sense of widespread underdevelopment, rape and disillusionment which has dogged them right into the 21st century, the age of fast-track communication and technology which has brought about both merits and demerits of human life. The fact of the matter is that Africans need relief, rest and a revitalisation. African leadership has everything to do with this.

Thus, churches, as servants of humankind and God, should not be tired of contributing to a firmer grasp of socio-politico-economic concepts, such as globalisation, to a movement towards the transformation of society, to an affirmation or belief in the *homo Africanus* in Africa as the master of their destiny, God being their help, and to a movement towards the empowerment of all God's people and their posterity.

Conclusion

What this article has done is to highlight and point to some of the challenges that have to be placed high on the agenda of ecclesial life and the theological enterprise in African Christianity.

One cannot avoid to mention that there is so much alienation, pain and suffering in our world today. In this vein, African Christianity should seek to be a transformational religion for the whole of life, affecting all facets of human life towards a fuller life for all. That is to say, a religion that seeks to transform the lives of Africans for the better and in every way possible. Thus demonstrating that African Christianity does not exist for itself, but for the whole of Africa and the world.

The way forward is to keep strengthening African Christianity in all its roles and ensure that exemplary behaviour in leadership and programmes, premised on genuine service and ideals of Jesus Christ, is held high up on the agenda of ecclesial life. Most important, African Christianity must ensure that ecclesial life and work is supported by a resilient and accountable self-sustaining economic and financial base.

African Christianity has a role to play in the African society and in the global community of humans, not only must this role be executed firmly and with focus, but that this must be done inclusively, responsibly and appropriately. African Christianity must continue to join hands with all those who seek the holistic development of Africa towards a common destiny. The author is of a sanguine hope that Africa can reclaim its place in world history. And 'religion in context', in theory and praxis, has everything to do with this.

Therefore, 'religion in an African context' should not negate itself nor be oblivious nor abdicate its responsibility, but should decisively and passionately seek to contribute to the healing, the renewal and the holistic *commutatio* of Africa in particular and of our world in general, that all might have life and have it in its fullness.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this paper.

References

- Aduyoye, M.A., 2005, 'A Letter to my Ancestors', in N. Otieno & H. McCullum (eds.), *Journey of Hope: Towards A New Ecumenical Africa*, pp. xv–xvii, World Council of Churches, Geneva.
- All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) 2007, *Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs): Hopes, Fears and Challenges*, All Africa Conference of Churches, Nairobi.
- Baur, J., 1994, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, Paulines, Nairobi.
- Bediako, K., 1995, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of A Non-Western Religion*, Orbis Maryknoll, New York.
- Bediako, K., 2004, *Jesus and the Gospel on Africa: History and Experience*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York.
- Bless, C. & Achola, P., 1990, *Fundamentals of Social Research Methods: An African Perspective*, Government Printers, Lusaka.
- Bosch, D.J., 1991, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York.
- Bwalya M., 1998, 'Economic Sources of Violence: Raising Global Awareness', paper presented during the 8th WCC Assembly at the Padare, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1–30 August.
- Bwalya, M., 2000, 'A review of Theological education in Zambia – with a focus on the United Church of Zambia', paper presented at a seminar during the *Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the United Church of Zambia Theological College*, Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation, Kitwe. Zambia, 11–25 August.
- Bwalya, M., 2001, *A Theological-Ethical Framework for Economic Development*, viewed 05 November 2011, from <http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-09262005-235003/>
- Bwalya, M., Marlin, B. & Peter, C. (eds.), 2010, *Evangelism or Development: Interpreting Christian Mission in the 21st Century*, Zapf Chancery, Eldoret.
- Chuba, B.S., 2005, *A History of Early Christian Missions and Church Unity in Zambia*, Mission Press, Ndola.
- Chuba, B.S., 2008, 'God of our Fathers is our God: African Christian Theology in Practice': Class notes, The United Church of Zambia Theological College.
- 'Globalisation has made Africa a dumping ground', *The Post*, February 09, 2004, p. 2.
- Groves, C.P., 1948, *Planting of Christianity in Africa*, Lutterworth, London.
- Gutierrez, G., 1973, *A Theology of Liberation*, Orbis, Maryknoll, N.Y.
- Heibroner, L.R., 1988, *Behind The Veil of Economics*, W.W. Norton, New York.
- Isichei, E., 1995, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Mahlangu-Ngchobo, M., 2010, 'Mission and HIV/AIDS: The ABC of Virus, HIV, and AIDS', in M. Bwalya, B. Marlin & C. Peter (eds.), *Evangelism or Development? Interpreting Christian Mission in the 21st Century*, pp. 471–476, Zapf Chancery, Eldoret.
- Masango, M., 2010, 'Mission Challenges Facing the Churches in the African Continent', in M. Bwalya, B. Marlin & C. Peter (eds.), *Evangelism or Development? Interpreting Christian Mission in the 21st Century*, pp. 175–177, Zapf Chancery, Eldoret.
- Mbiti, J., [1975] 1991, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd edn., Heinemann, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.
- Mombo, E., 2010, 'Missiological challenges facing the African church in the 21st Century', in M. Bwalya, B. Marlin & C. Peter (eds.), *Evangelism or Development? Interpreting Christian Mission in the 21st Century*, pp. 173–174, Zapf Chancery, Eldoret.
- Mundile, G., 2010, 'Truth to Tell: A response to Mankenkolo Mahlangu-Ngchobo and Isable A. Phiri', in M. Bwalya, B. Marlin & C. Peter (eds.), *Evangelism or Development? Interpreting Christian Mission in the 21st Century*, pp. 489–493, Zapf Chancery, Eldoret.
- Otieno, N. & McCullum, H. (eds.), 2005, *Journey of Hope: Towards A New Ecumenical Africa*, World Council of Churches, Geneva.
- Parratt, J., 1987a, 'Current Issues in African Theology', in J. Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, pp. 120–125, SPCK, London.
- Parratt, J. (ed.), 1987b, *A Reader in African Theology*, SPCK, London.
- Phiri, S.A., 2010, 'HIV/AIDS – A Theological Response', in M. Bwalya, B. Marlin & C. Peter (eds.), *Evangelism or Development? Interpreting Christian Mission in the 21st Century*, pp. 477–488, Zapf Chancery, Eldoret.
- Ragsdale, J.P., 1986, *Protestant Mission Education in Zambia: 1880–1954*, Associated University Press, Cranbury, New Jersey.
- World Bank, 1999, *African Developers Indicators 2000*, World Bank, Washington.
- World Council of Churches, 2007, *Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE): Consultation On Linking Poverty, Wealth And Ecology: African Ecumenical Perspectives*, World Council of Churches, Geneva.