

# **DOING THEOLOGY IN AFRICA**

**by Dr. David M. Kasali**

**President of Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology**

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Theology cannot be articulated in a vacuum, it needs a context, which accords to its meaning and relevance. Consequently, the nature and practice of theology in Africa can best be discussed within a contextual framework of African realities, opportunities and challenges. That is to say, to understand the way theology is done in Africa, one needs to understand the political, socio-cultural and economic realities that shape the outlook of the African people. One needs to understand Africa irrespective of the fact that the continent has been described as an enigma.

## **THE CONTEXT OF THEOLOGY IN AFRICA - The African Realities**

I have just mentioned that Africa has been described as an enigma, a puzzle - a paradox. The continent that is so rich and yet so is poor. A leading African Bishop and evangelist described Africa as an "active volcano". Post Independent Africa has witnessed wars of unparalleled brutality. The amount of blood that has smeared the history of Africa cannot be overestimated. The wars in historic Congo (then Zaire and now DRC), the Nigeria Biafra civil war, the Rwanda Genocide, the Ugandan holocaust, the operation no living thing in Sierra Leone, the ongoing wars in Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, Ivory Coast, all confirm the Bishop's assertion that Africa is an "active volcano."

Apart from wars, Africa continues to suffer from the legacies of repressive governments - legacies of corruption, nepotism, and tribalism. Africa is trapped in an intricate web of poverty spawn by disease and poor health, unprecedented population growth, high infant mortality rate, low income, famine and malnutrition, spiritual poverty, rural to urban migration, refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons), pollution and environmental degradation, etc. Added to these in the most recent years is the re-awakening of Islam and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. All these factors contribute to paint a picture of an uninhabitable Africa.

However, regardless of the gruesome African realities outlined above, the continent has great potential. The continent has vast mineral and marine resources which if properly harnessed can go a long way to address the issue of poverty on the continent. On the political scene, Africa is making significant strides. The current serving General Secretary of the United Nations and his predecessor are sons of the soil of Africa. Africa has produced Nobel laureates, world-class athletes, the second space tourist and has contributed significantly to the pursuit of world peace and prosperity. With all these, the continent remains poor, chaotic, underdeveloped and dependent. This paradox cannot be explained easily hence my point in affirming that Africa is an enigma.

The situations described above provide the platform for doing theology in Africa. It is within this precarious African context that the Church of Christ is theologising. Like the context in which it exists, the church of Africa has its unique characteristics and opportunities, which are relevant in her attempt to theologise.

### **Characteristics of the African Church**

The African church in the new millennium can be distinguished by the following characteristics:

1. The African Church is a growing Church: At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only 3% of Africans living on the continent professed to be Christians. At the beginning of the millennium, almost 50% of the people in Africa claim to be Christians. Consequently, the church in Africa has been rated as one of the fastest growing churches. I am optimistic that within the next thirty years the remaining part of Africa will yield to Christianity. This significant characteristic of the church comes with attendant problems. In urban areas, church buildings are not big enough to accommodate the members who attend Sunday worship services; as a result churches now have multiple services each Sunday. Where this is the case, the churches do not have enough trained pastors and teachers to staff the church. If this problem is not handled carefully, what is a blessing will be blight for the African church. We at NEGST have sensed the urgency to address this issue and are continually diversifying our curriculum and are in the process of making theological education available to a large number of people.
2. The African church is a comparatively younger church: The phenomenal growth discussed above is from the younger generation. On the average, the people who attend church in Africa are youths. At NEGST, the average age of those who are training for pastoral leadership and for the teaching and missionary ventures of the church is below thirty-five years. The youthful nature of the church will continue to provide the impetus for evangelism, which will lead to more converts. Again this may be blight to the church if the church does not adopt adequate training,

discipleship and modelling strategies to combat fanaticism, intolerance and unwise decisions on the part of the youths.

3. The African Church is becoming increasingly African: The mainstream churches in Africa were transplanted directly from Europe or America. It is common to see that the nature of worship in these mainstream churches is common to their European or American ancestors. However, with the phenomenal growth and influence of African initiated churches, Worship services in African churches are now more African. Indigenous choruses, the talking drum and other African musical instruments have become functional part of the worship service. Africans now freely express their emotions in singing and dancing. The African church has become louder with unrestrained freedom to express their praise for God. This also has its own blight. If not handled properly, it will easily lead to syncretism.
4. The African Church is becoming open and educated: The male predominance in the clergy is gradually becoming a thing of the past as many more female clergies are now emerging. Women are now in full time pastoral ministries as their male counterparts. The openness is not only seen in the emergence of female clergy but also, the rift between clergy and laity is becoming narrower in the African church. The laity is now becoming knowledgeable in the things of God. Theological education is no longer reserved for only those in pastoral ministries. Also, the African church is becoming more educated. In the twentieth century, only a handful of seminaries and Bible colleges existed in Africa. Today, there are hundreds of seminaries and training institutions. The clergy is becoming more and more trained for the ministry. It is now a commonplace thing to see a Masters or a

Ph.D holder in full time ministry.

I have this far given a brief background of the African context and the context of the church. The church can now be seen as having a dual challenge. Internal challenges coming from the successes of the church as outlined above, and external challenges coming from the socio-political and economic factors as discussed earlier on. It is within these two challenges that the Church in Africa is theologising.

### **Africa, the Church, Theology and Theological Education**

At the beginning of this paper, I have asserted that theology must be done in context for the sake of meaning and relevance. However, Africa does not present a unified context. The socio-political, economic and religious realities in Africa are as diverse as the number of communities in Africa. Consequently, we cannot talk of African theology as if there is only one response to the numerous problems. We can talk of theologies - responses to the multi faceted realities of Africa. With this background, let me assert the dimensions of doing theology in Africa

1. Any theology developed must be adequately focused on the real-life needs of the African Christian. Any African theology must scratch where the Africans are itching. Often times our theologies in Africa scratch where the Americans and Europeans itch and leave the African itching all over with nothing to scratch. In this light, theological education must be more focused and theological agenda set by the realities of the African. The African Christian needs to understand fully and to live out his/her faith in light of his/her realities. In this light African Theology must have the structural capacity to address relevant issues; this calls for an

evaluation of paradigms. Over the years, we have had at least three theological paradigms - Theology of inculturation, Black theology and Liberation theology. It is becoming increasingly clear that none of these paradigms has the structural capability to solve contemporary problems now. We must now look out for new paradigms that address issues of socio-political reconstruction, gender and the environment. It is in this direction that we at NEGST have developed a scholarly unit in our academic programme called the Institute for the Study of African Realities. This unit is open to scholars who are interested in the realities of Africa.

2. Related to 1. above, any African theology must be holistic: The worship of God has a spiritual and sociological dimension. Often times, our theology of worship focus on the spiritual dimension with little regard to the sociological dimension. Any African Holistic theology must address the sociological dimension of Justice. I have earlier on outlined the attributes of the African web of poverty; I want to further say that the hub of that web is injustice. African theology must confront the unjust systems of governance instituted by repressive regimes in Africa, the unjust conditionality of the IMF and the World Bank, the unjust standards of Western democracies that initiate and sustain Western interests with little regards to the suffering of the people in the Third World. African theology must be done on the platform of justice for all. Justice must receive more emphasis and must be the core part of theology in the African context.

To be further holistic, any African theology must address the sociological issue of land. The issue of land has been the cause of most bloody conflicts in Africa. The

African is integrally related to his land and a landless African is more of a nonentity. Land, in traditional Africa, is a symbol of the African unity between the living and the dead. It is a status symbol and accords belongingness to the individual. With such a sociological importance, African theologies must be done on the platform that accounts for those factors that alienates the individual from his land robbing him/her of the sole means of livelihood.

The third sociological factor that any holistic theology in Africa must address is community. Africans have a very deep sense of belongingness. The African maxim of "I am because we are" must not be slighted in favour of Western individualistic sense of living. Due to space and time I have not done any deep reflection on the sociological dimension of a holistic African theology. What I have done is to awaken your attention to the importance of justice, land and community as platforms for doing African theology.

3. African theology must not be speculative: It is time the doing of African theology move from the Bible School, the Seminary, the Graduate school into the affairs and daily lives of the people. African Theology must notice the public arena where laws are made and policies formulated and enforced. Theology must not be disengaged from the normal life of people.

In my opinion, I believe that as African Theology endeavours to be focused, holistic and non-speculative, there are at least three things it must do to meet the challenges of meaning and relevance.

1. In doing African Theology, African Christianity must develop its own point of view. African theologians must think and now do things for themselves. The American and European theologians and Biblical scholars cannot provide answers for the African realities. African theologians need to develop content for African theology, which is relevant and globally tangible. The impetus for doing African Theology must be from within than without. African Theology must be self-reliant.
2. There have been ideally three spheres of engagement for African theology - the Church community including its training institutions, the University and the public. At any one time, African theology must know the sphere of engagement. While these are distinct spheres they ought not be separated in the process of doing theology. What obtains in the university and seminaries must by any means filter down into the public arena. African Theology must as a matter of priority bridge the gap between the public and the university. In our Library at NEGST, there are relevant research findings that have never reached the public for consumption. This is unfortunate.
3. African Christianity must pursue credible comprehensive strategies for involving the whole body of Christ in seeking out solutions for the multifaceted problems we have in Africa. Over the years, there had been overwhelming confidence that only theological education obtained in schools can provide all the answers for theological issues plaguing Africa. This is no longer true as theological schools are becoming more expensive, theoretical and time consuming. While theological schools are a way of addressing the issues in Africa, Christians must look for ways



of equipping workers as they serve on the field. There must not be any single approach. I have highlighted the multiplicity and complexity of the African contexts; these require multiple approaches to solving the problem.

I have endeavoured to give a summary of the direction of doing theology in Africa. Africa must rise up to the challenge, set its agenda, and move forward to do a theology that must be that accords to its meaning and relevance. To do this, African theologians will need the help of their colleagues in the West to come alongside and help, in dialogue and reflection.

The evitable question is the place of theological institutions in doing theology in Africa. At the cutting edge of theological education in Africa is the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology. Every year, many Christian leaders graduate from NEGST to go out and do theology in Africa. Because of the central role NEGST plays in developing theologians for the African continent, the school has been sensitive to these issues and has made significant strides in promoting excellence in African Christianity by committing itself to its Mission, Goals and Purpose (**Refer to Mission, Goal and Purpose of NEGST**).

We intend foremost to empower our students for critical thinking and reflection on the major issues/realities that shape African theology as I have discussed. We must enhance their capabilities to develop paradigms relevant to those issues. Also, we are aware that the traditional paradigms of doing theological education, which involves residential study is becoming more expensive and unaffordable to those who are really doing theology out there. As a result NEGST is in the process of repackaging its

academic programmes to be delivered on extension sites in the city of Nairobi. Apart from these extension sites, NEGST organises continental wide consultations that address the African realities. One such consultation was in 2000 in which key African church leaders met with members of the academy to discuss issues related to the church. Another continent wide consultation is in process and will be held in January 2004.

We in Africa will not do it alone. We need colleagues from the West, but colleagues who will be ready to listen, partner on equal basis, and reflect with us. This is how the church of Jesus ought to function. May we be the people who will respond to this challenge.