



Gustavo Gutierrez and the Economic Realities of Africa: An African Theological Reflection

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to find out how Gustavo Gutierrez used theological reflection and praxis to effectively impact the economic and social life of his home country, Peru and Latin America at large and to establish the lessons African theologians can imbibe from him. The methodology used was a secondary qualitative analysis of literature. In this regard, the works of Gutierrez were reviewed. Key strands of African theological reflection were reviewed. The analysis of various perspectives was done to establish their respective impact on the socio-economic life of their people. The key findings are that African theologians were preoccupied with theological phenomenon at seminar and conference levels in coming up with various strands of African theological reflections. On the other hand, Gutierrez did his theological reflection from the point of view of the suffering poor thereby reflecting on what type of theology was needed to permanently change the narratives of the poor. The concluding lessons for African Theologians include a preferential option for the poor, social ministries in the Church should demonstrate incarnation, divine spirituality should entail a commitment to the poor and oppressed, and the establishment of concrete corrective actions. The importance of the Church Community in the divine enterprise for taking ample notice of the presence of the poor and working without fail to change their story. This is a scholarly contribution to harnessing the synergy among strands of African theology towards effective and practical advocacy and activities towards the eradication of abject poverty from Africa and the development of the continent. The paper contributes to the search for practical steps to reduce or end the abject poverty and poor development trajectory in Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

During a course in Theology and Economic Life at Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, there was a soul-searching time for the reader/writer. The soul of Africa too was searched, as it were. The souls of African theologians and economists too had to be searched. The search is for the truth about the economic realities facing Africa and its people, the failures of attempts at changing narratives of the never-ending abject poverty and the reasons for its persistence and aggravation. It is postulated that Theology has not been made to have as much transformational impact on the economic life of Africans as it could. John Kwakye, by the title and contents of his book *Africa's Long Road to Development*, necessitates these soul searches. Certainly, there must be a discovery of the critical paradigm shifts which will ensure economic development, poverty eradication as well as economic and social prosperity in Africa. Vatican II tasked theologians to make their works directly relevant to the conditions of living.¹ According to John Dear, "Gutierrez's ground-breaking work, *A Theology of*

¹ Vatican II was the 21st and most recent ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, lasted 11th October 1962 to 8th December, 1965, under the auspices of Pope John XXIII. In the ecumenical outreach to address the needs of modern world, the call on theologians of impact the economic well being of society was made. Source: en.m.wikipedia. accessed 15th February, 2024

Liberation, published in 1971, changed everything. It seemed to chart a whole new course for the church, not just for Latin America, but everywhere.”² Gutierrez took up the task of situating the text of Scripture in the realities of Latin America’s realities of abject poverty and systemic injustice. As a result, it was realised that Christ’s incarnation ministry has to be practically replicated among the struggling oppressed poor. Africa’s situation is not different from that of Latin America and therefore we need to share in the achievements of Gutierrez’s theologizing amidst the oppressed poor and economically deprived of Rimac, Lima slum in particular, Peru in focus and Latin America in general.

The concrete response to Vatican II is lacking in African theological reflection, which remains largely conference agenda and academic endeavour without mobilizing the church into incarnational ministries which will affect the livelihood of the suffering poor. There is a big gap between African theological reflection and real living conditions of Africans, including Christians, which are replete with abject poverty, oppression, disease, squalor and suffering.

What must African Theologians add to their reflections and praxis to achieve what Gutierrez achieved in Latin America by his Liberation Theology? The question is what paradigm shifts are required of African theological reflections to impact directly the economic life of Africans?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theology of Gutierrez

Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian Dominican priest and theologian, is held as the pacesetter of liberation theology. The term ‘Liberation Theology’ was coined in 1971 by Gutierrez during the writing of *A Theology of Liberation*. The book is touted as the best brand of liberation theology which evolved in the context of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America in the middle decades of the 20th Century, arising mainly as a necessary obligatory reaction to the poverty and social injustice in the region.³

In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutierrez observed that the "development" approach, could not resolve the fundamental factors that cause exploitation because it did not disrupt or remove the exploitative systems and structures. He therefore chose the "liberation" trajectory. He called for radical structural and social change.⁴ For Gutierrez, practical dedication to this liberation must necessarily be in motion before the reflections in theology. Gutierrez thinks that if the oppressed poor use violence in their struggle, it should be expected and allowed in line with the texture of liberation. To Gutierrez, the violence by the oppressed ought not to be on the same plane as the violence of the oppressor against the oppressed. Interestingly, Gutierrez's liberation approach entails a deep sense of spirituality in which one experiences such a ‘conversion to the oppressed’⁵ that one is prepared to offer unconditional love to them. He insists that this should be the source of true Christian joy.

The Preferential Option for the Poor

Gutierrez calls for understanding the realities of the poor. Being poor is not simply lacking economic resources for development. Gutierrez understands poverty as "a way of living, thinking, loving, praying, believing and hoping, spending leisure time, and struggling for a livelihood."⁶ That is why he says, "Poverty is not a fatality, it is a condition."⁷ In another translation, “Poverty is not caused by fate, it is caused by actions”⁸ Gutierrez blames poverty on society and its structures. To Gutierrez, what triggers poverty is multifaceted. In Latin America, it started with war and conquest times then political, geographical, and human issues. The proclamation of the gospel of salvation in Christ within the unjust condition of living in Latin America led to practical activities based on principles founded on the Scriptures.

The incarnation of Christ Jesus provides the biblical basis for practical Christian activities of intervention in the lives of people. To Gutierrez, the care Jesus Christ provided among the despised and outcasts of his days is instructive praxis for the church in contemporary times.

Gutierrez's persistent advocacy concerning the real condition of living in the world constitutes a charge to those who have forgotten the praxis of Christian love. Gutierrez's thought has marked, consciously or unconsciously, all of Latin American theology. The thoughts of Gutierrez can be seen from the evangelical

² John Dear, “Gustavo Gutierrez and the Preferential Option for the Poor,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 2011, 1–4.

³ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

⁴ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 17.

⁵ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 110, 116-120.

⁶ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xxi.

⁷ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*.

⁸ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 166.

agenda of the "integral mission" developed years after the liberation phenomenon began. Furthermore, the development of social ministries by the evangelical churches is also indicative of the influence of Gutierrez.⁹

Fundamental Principles About Life and Death

In his introduction to Gustavo Gutierrez: *Spiritual Writings*, Groody reviews Gutierrez's three fundamental principles about life and death.¹⁰ First, material poverty is never good but an evil to be opposed. Second, poverty is not a result of fate or laziness but is due to structural injustices that privilege some while marginalizing others. Third, poverty is a complex reality and is not limited to its economic dimension. To be poor is to be insignificant. Poverty leads to early and avoidable death.¹¹

The overriding preoccupation of liberation theology is the unacceptable condition of the poor. Vividly stated by Gutierrez, "The historical womb from which liberation theology has emerged is the life of the poor."¹² This leads naturally to the 'preferential option for the poor- commitment to the poor.'¹³ The emphasis is on economic and material poverty. Liberation theology "must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors."¹⁴ The effective participation in the struggle by theologians, pastors, elders and congregations is lacking. The practical demonstration of being on the side of the poor is lacking.

African Theologians and African Theologies

Writing in 1984 Justin Ukpong¹⁵ stated that "contextualization of theology has become a major theological orientation" and that "it is within the framework of this general orientation that three major theological currents have emerged in Africa."¹⁶ They are: first, African inculturation theology, simply referred to as African theology; second, South African black theology; third, African liberation theology. The fourth could be the theology of reconstruction according to J. N. K. Mugambi 1995.¹⁷

Yet, according to Francis Anekwe Oborji¹⁸ from about the 1950s there have been many works by African authors on Christian theology from the point of view of Africa.¹⁹ Oborji posits that the works of African theologians cover two main spheres. One set is on the synergy between the Good News and the culture and tradition of Africa's belief systems and the other set covers Christian faith and the progress in living conditions on the continent. The two sets of works are not at variance with each other. This synergy of thoughts in inculturation and liberation, in the works of African writers, resulted in a new trend namely, the theology of reconstruction. Oborji states that "in the three principal trends of African theology, namely, inculturation, liberation and reconstruction."²⁰ African theologians attempt to relate the Christian message to the socio-cultural, political and economic reality of Africa."²¹ Oborji tries to win some credit for African theology by indicating that African theology by attempting to address the reality of Africa "did not begin in academic institutions, but was born in international congresses and conferences organized by the African scholars."²² All the same, the

⁹ Chris Wright, "Integral Mission and the Great Commission: The Five Marks of Mission," accessed December 1, 2023, www.loimission.net.

¹⁰ Daniel Groody, *Gustavo Gutierrez: Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

¹¹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xxi.

¹² Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xxxiii.

¹³ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xxv-xxvi.

¹⁴ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 174.

¹⁵ Justin S. Ukpong, in giving his thesis for writing 'The Emergence of African Theologies', identifies the three streams of theologies on the African scene as, African inculturation theology, South African black theology and African liberation theology. Ukpong then states 'Though young, these theologies unquestionably excel in terms of output. But in the mass of literature available, one must search long and hard to be able to find a single publication that provides a comprehensive picture of what the African theological grapevine looks like.' He then gives an attractive purpose of his essay as, 'an attempt to zero in on the main outlines of these theologies and analyze and evaluate them.'

¹⁶ Justin S Ukpong, "The Emergence of African Theologies," *Theological Studies* 45, no. 3 (1984): 501-36.

¹⁷ Jesse N Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (East African Educational Publ., 1995).

¹⁸ Francis Anekwe Oborji is a Nigerian diocesan priest, is professor of missiology at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome. He is a founding officer of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM), and author of *Concepts of Mission: The Evolution of Contemporary Missiology* (Orbis 2006).

¹⁹ Francis Anekwe Oborji, "African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives ," 2017, <http://www.foborji.org/files/African-Theology.pdf>.

²⁰ This discourse has avoided attempting to reconcile the categorizations of Ukpong and Oborji. Suffice it to submit that preoccupations with this type of differences among Africa Theologians have not been productive outside of academia and conference grounds.

²¹ Oborji, "African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives ,"1.

²² Oborji, "African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives ,"1.

international conferences are still too distanced from communities and oppressed suffering people, where Gutierrez's theology of liberation was born. According to Gutierrez, his liberation theology was not solely for academic purposes because critical for the theology of liberation were "Christian communities, religious groups, and peoples, who are becoming increasingly conscious that the oppression and neglect from which they suffer are incompatible with their faith in Jesus Christ."²³ The conference-space-theologizing in contrast with theologizing from the trenches of suffering and poverty is a central issue in this discourse. Gutierrez came into prominence with his theology of liberation from the trenches of suffering and poverty. This is an example for African theologians and church leaders.

According to Oborji, African theologians hold the view that African culture and what it has endured over the past generate the necessity for a new cultural identity which will help African adherents of the Christian faith to evangelize Africa. From the perspective of Gutierrez, one would suggest that evangelization in Africa has lacked a demonstration of the practical love of Christ for the poor as well as a practical effort at addressing the existential challenges of people.

Trends in African Theology

According to Oborji, the African theology of inculturation has prongs and these are African Christology and Ecclesiology.²⁴ African theology of liberation which is concerned with the issues of the poor (Engelbert Mveng) and socio-political-economic conditions in Africa (Jean-Marc Ela) have been given enormous space by African writers. The theology of reconstruction seeks to synergise the theologies of inculturation and liberation. The African theology of reconstruction, though focuses on the central subjects of cultural identity and social liberation, pushes for a critical involvement of the church in transforming Africa socially. This objective (which excludes economic transformation in emphasis) of the theology of reconstruction suggests that Africa's theological road to holistic theological reflection on the total existential condition of Africa remains long and indeterminable.

African Liberation Theology

African liberation theology integrates the issues of liberation culturally, socially, politically and economically in the entire continent. Liberation theology dwells on the debilitating social and cultural systems bequeathed by tradition and culture, the modern social and political arrangements as well as economic systems. In addition, the necessity for freedom from oppressive conditions of poor health, lack of basics of life, squalor as well as chauvinism against women are burning issues for theology.

According to Oborji, Jean-Marc Ela ably represents theologians in the sphere of liberation theology. Ela, a Priest of the Roman Catholic, hails from Cameroun. Ela's best reflections on liberation are in his two books.²⁵ Ela begins his theological reflection with a search for how theological reflection should encompass inculturation and liberation. In this respect, Ela wishes African theology moves away from an emphasis on anthropological and cultural challenges. Ela thought that being overly preoccupied and concerned about cultural identity can become a "dangerous alibi," thereby ignoring equally critical matters in today's African continent.²⁶ So true and it seems – if not clear enough – that Ela has not been heeded and African Theologians are yet to get anywhere near what Gutierrez has used theological reflection and related praxis to do in Latin America.

In the opinion of Ela, the circumstances of Africa require creative thinking and actions to make the paradigm shifts that would inspire hope and optimism. These paradigm shifts are taking too long to come on, hence the question on hand and this discourse. It is the need for such creative thinking outside the box that made Ela elevate his experience as Pastor of the people of Kirdi in Tokombere village in the north Cameroun into theological reflection. His theological reflections produced a theological paradigm shift. This must be one rare example of an African theologian doing bottom-up theological reflection.

According to Oborji, "One would have expected that Ela could have developed a political system that could address the political scene he so described in his writings. Unfortunately, this was not the case."²⁷ Oborji is right in declaring that Africa is fatigued by the theology of liberation that is all about lamenting and criticizing but does not provide practical, concrete and demonstrable ways of getting out of the jungle.²⁸ To be fair, it must be recalled that Ela did lots of work among the poor people of Kirdi in Tokombere, in Cameroun (as mentioned above) before going on voluntary exile after a priest was assassinated.

²³ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xix.

²⁴ Oborji, "African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives," 10.

²⁵ Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009).

²⁶ Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 170.

²⁷ Oborji, "African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives," 16.

²⁸ Oborji, "African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives," 16.

African Theology of Reconstruction

J. N. K. Mugambi is the pacesetter in the focus on reconstruction in African theological reflections. Since inculturation and liberation themes recur regularly in the reflections on the theology of reconstruction, “new liberation theology” may be the more suitable term to use. Mugambi wrote on reconstruction first in, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*.²⁹

Writers on the African theology of reconstruction have opined that the theology of identity and cultural consciousness be toned down by African authors. One cannot agree more with this call. According to the proponents, there is an urgent need to move away from liberating Africa, as it were, to reconstructing and transforming it. Inculturation and liberation were deemed as not enough to deal with the contemporary economic and socio-political circumstances of the African continent. It is a disappointment that some theologians are looking beyond incarnation and liberation, the very frameworks that form the core of the salvific work of Christ Jesus. These assertions are serious indictments of the brand of Africa’s theology of liberation (African liberation theology) because Gutierrez’s theology of liberation has gotten the job done in many respects and the job lifted off the ground in other respects, still in other respects the job of liberation has been set in motion. Liberation is one within salvation in Christ Jesus by faith and the process of maturation and overcoming challenges and obstacles continue thereafter. Indeed according to Ela, “faith touches on the totality of existence and all of its problems.”³⁰

African Palaver Model

On hand is a recent philosophical thought on theology which is fully termed the “African palaver model.”³¹ Oborji records Richard K. Chelimo, as clarifying that palaver is different from ordinary meetings of community or family. Palaver gatherings in search of fundamental causes of challenges are profound. Enthusiastic discussions ensue, leading to resolutions to which everyone is obliged to be committed. Palaver is not held under the auspices of a trusted and knowledgeable traditional leader other than the chief. During the palaver discussions, equal opportunity is available for all members of the community to share their views.³² Palaver is a vantage space for a practicing liberation theologian, as it were. The power of the chief is invoked only after an agreement is reached on what to do concerning an issue tackled in the meeting. It can be seen that palaver provides the community with effective platforms for building values that preserve and ensure a holistic and fulfilling communal bonding and living.

Oborji concludes his piece with the following assertion:

Today, African theologians are urged to minimise the conflict which exists between the proponents of the three dominant trends, namely, inculturation, liberation and reconstruction. This is in keeping with the theologians’ idea of an integrative African theology. It is a theology that pays attention to issues of social transformation in Africa as it grapples with the question of faith commitment in the continent. Viewed from that perspective, the strength of African theology lies in the fact that it seeks to match theoretical and academic elaboration with social and practical commitment.³³

However, juxtaposing this acclaimed strength of African theology against Gutierrez’s theology of liberation and the Latin American liberation experience, African theologies of all the shades, names and paradigms have a long way to go in terms of praxis and real liberating works. The reason is that the African theological reflections are mostly not from down, the real practical day-to-day life struggles of the oppressed poor, upwards towards substantive texts in Scripture and their exegesis which provide substantive solutions.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology would be a secondary qualitative analysis of the literature. A review of the life and writings of Gustavo Gutierrez and other literature will be undertaken. This discourse will scan African Theologians and African Theologies and look at African Ecumenical efforts to deal with the economic realities of Africa. The realities of Africa’s economy will be highlighted from the perspective of Dr John Kwakye.³⁴ An attempt will be made to pick up the salient points of the liberation theology of Gutierrez. A section will then be devoted to

²⁹ Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*.

³⁰ Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 67.

³¹ Oborji, “African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives,” 16.

³² Oborji, “African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives,” 19.

³³ Oborji, “African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives,” 20.

³⁴ John Kwakye is the Director of Research at the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Ghana. Previously, he worked with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as Advisor to the Executive Director and as Ghana’s representative at the IMF.

highlighting additional lessons that African Theologians may learn from Gutierrez to bridge the gap between theological reflection and the real living conditions of Africans.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Liberating Praxis

The freedom Christ gives is viewed by Gutierrez as holistic for spiritual and economic liberties. This is a key lesson for African Theologians. Spirituality enables a person to carry deep faith in Christ and to do exactly what Christ would do about a situation. Theological reflection on liberation is done with a disposition for really workable activities. Reflection on the condition of living of the poor should lead to what liberation theologians call "liberating praxis,"³⁵ where they try to redress the process by which the vision and mission of the Church build the livelihood, spiritual and intellectual liberation of oppressed poor peoples as a fulfillment of the businesses of the kingdom of God. The liberating praxis, for that matter, has its foundation in the love that God shows to humanity. The example of God's love toward humanity should drive fellow-feeling and practical support which should abound in the interpersonal relationships among the children of God.

The Importance of the Church Community

Gutierrez stayed in the church knowing that it was the church as a community that would work out the practical processes of liberation, believing that solidarizing with the poor people provides strength for the church.³⁶ It was important for Gutierrez to renew fidelity to the church whereby in addition to hope in the Lord, the church will reassert solidarity with the poor, who are the "privileged members of the reign of God."³⁷ Working patiently and assiduously within the confines of the church by Gutierrez and his friends enabled magisterium to be procured for the theology of liberation. This enabled the entire Roman Catholic Church in Latin America to provide the mass movement for prosecuting the agenda of integral liberation. The lesson for African theologians is that they need the community of the church whose members' real-life experiences must provide the locus for their theological reflection. African theologians must draw on the leadership of the church in Africa in theological reflection that would make Jesus the friend of the poor and marginalized visible as the face of the church. In this way, there would be "the face of a church that is poor, missionary, and paschal."³⁸ In this way, the church creates attraction for the church's "prophetic function of denouncing every human injustice."³⁹ Authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against poverty is largely lacking in congregations, the church, church leaders and theologians.

Social Ministries in the Church that demonstrate incarnation

Africa needs widespread incarnational ministries in the church and beyond which will affect the poor directly. There is a need for theologians to live in the slums, work on prostitutes, live with rural dwellers, and work with illegal miners (known in Ghana as 'galamseyers'). Theologians need to make the presence of Christ Jesus felt in every troubled spot and the circumstances of the oppressed poor. This implies following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. – Christian commitment to the poor and oppressed "is grounded in the final analysis of the God of faith. It is a theocentric, prophetic option that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love."⁴⁰ Many African theologians are not deep enough in this spirituality as mirrored in the posture, outlook and actions which are often condemned by congregants, the press and the public. The church and theologians are not sufficiently exemplary in following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ with regard to seeking and protecting the interest of the oppressed poor. Examples of incarnational works, if any, are too few in a continent that is so much in need of the liberating work of Jesus Christ. Writing on Incarnational Ministry, Jake Thurston states, "Jesus' ministry was embedded right where humans were. He met people right where they were by living among them, eating with them and hearing their stories..."⁴¹

³⁵ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xxx.

³⁶ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xlii-xliii.

³⁷ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xviii.

³⁸ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xlv.

³⁹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 173.

⁴⁰ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xxvii.

⁴¹ Jake Thurston, "Incarnational Ministry," www.indwes.edu, accessed, 12th December, 2023.

Development of a Mass Movement

Africa urgently needs a mass movement for economic liberation praxis that would demand without fail radical structural and social change because “we will have an authentic theology of liberation only when the oppressed themselves can freely raise their voice and express themselves directly and creatively in society.”⁴²

Gutierrez states that for this liberation to be trustworthy, the oppressed people themselves would have to undertake the exercise. That is the only way it would evolve from the values cherished by the poor and considered proper to them. To him, this is the only authentic context in which a true cultural revolution happens.⁴³ What African theologians must begin to do fearlessly is the conscientization of the citizenry, especially the oppressed poor, about the fact that unacceptable economic conditions can be reversed.⁴⁴

Concrete Action to Rectify Situation - Praxis

Theologians in Africa need to conscientize and mobilize Christian communities for praxis which would correct economic ills. Gutierrez states:

Behind liberation theology are Christian communities, religious groups, and peoples, who are becoming increasingly conscious that the oppression and neglect from which they suffer are incompatible with their faith in Jesus. These concrete, real-life movements are what give this theology its distinctive character; in liberation theology, faith and life are inseparable.⁴⁵

Pastors must begin to be bold to engage congregants in respect of their livelihood challenges in a more holistic manner. Gutierrez cautions that the call for unity among Christians as children of the same Lord should not be an escapist of the profound and real causes of the differences and indifference if there must be success in building a just society.⁴⁶ Liberation theology calls for reflection that bears action that can transform the present predicament not from a passive point of view but the point of view of the poor. “The urgent needs of Africa reject every excuse we can manufacture.”⁴⁷

The Point of View of the Oppressed Poor

The basics of liberation theology are the point of view of the oppressed poor; theological work; and the proclamation of the kingdom of life aimed particularly at the poor.⁴⁸ Theological reflection must revitalize the actions of the Christian church community toward a greater, fuller, and more radical commitment to charity for liberation theological reflection to have optimum value.⁴⁹ In other words, nothing is fulfilling *per se* in theologizing within any framework unless it is within the framework of faith, love, and hope, and an unquenchable commitment to active participation in activities that would practically free humanity from all that dehumanizes it. With the glaring dehumanizing economic conditions staring at the face of the church in Africa and its theologians, concrete and sustained liberating actions are required in great intensity that would produce concrete relief to the poor.

Take Ample Notice of the New Presence of the Poor⁵⁰

The creation of vast movements of Africans through solidarity with the poor, who are in the majority, would provide the force of spiritual, moral, numerical, socio-economic, and political bargaining power with which to ensure structural changes that would release the poor from all manner of servitude, oppression and lack of opportunities. Gutierrez says of Ricoeur having asserted that one cannot be with the poor unless one is in the struggle against poverty.⁵¹ Gutierrez then indicates that solidarity with the poor must be apparent in specific actions, appropriate lifestyle, and a break from one’s social class to be able to assist the poor and the exploited to become aware of the exploitations they suffer and to be aware of the possibility of liberation therefrom.⁵² Authentic solidarity involves taking risks, according to Gutierrez.⁵³ African theologians must demonstrate a willingness to risk their lives for the course of the poor.

⁴² Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 174.

⁴³ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 57.

⁴⁴ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 57.

⁴⁵ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xix.

⁴⁶ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 75.

⁴⁷ Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 161.

⁴⁸ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xx.

⁴⁹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 174.

⁵⁰ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xx-xxi.

⁵¹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 172.

⁵² Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 172.

⁵³ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 172.

African Economic Realities

The economic realities of Africa include low production and productivity, low incomes, disadvantaged international trade and financial arrangements, among others. The cumulative results of these realities include hunger, squalor, disease, poverty and low education, among others. The unhealthy phenomena which have crystalized are cycles of poverty and poverty traps. In all world human development and economic data and statistics, Africa finds itself at the lowest, negative and receiving ends. For example, on the 'List of Countries by Projected GDP per capita' out of the lowest 44 GDPs (Nominal), only 12 countries are not in Africa.⁵⁴ The best African GDPs are Equatorial Guinea 54th with \$14,176 Gabon 76th with \$7,741, and Libya 85th with \$6,169. Ghana is the 146th with \$1,551. The highest Nominal GDP on the list is \$105,829 for Luxembourg.

In an IMF statistical table dated April 2017 and labeled 'Classification by World Economic Outlook Groups and their shares in Aggregate GDP, Exports of Goods and Services, and Population, 2016', the following grave picture is revealed. Only 39 advanced economies have 41.9 percent of world GDP, while 153 developing economies have the remaining 58.1 percent. Forty-five sub-Saharan African (SSA) economies have 3 percent. With respect to the export of goods and services, 39 advanced economies share 64.4 percent while developing economies, numbering 153, share the remaining 35.6 percent. Forty-five sub-Saharan African economies share only 2.4 percent. Life expectancy for 2015 estimates no sub-Saharan African (SSA) country was among the best 100. Ghana was the 172nd. Out of the worst 47, only Haiti and Afghanistan are not African countries.⁵⁵

In addition to the above stark economic and developmental realities, Africa is so indebted multilaterally and bilaterally that she needs debt relief regularly. Multilateral and bilateral engagements have become debt relief traps because the more the relief, the more the push back into more debt. According to John Kwakye, "Debt relief also increasingly became a political-economic tool used to get countries to 'be in line' and to carry out policies that were in accord with Western-style free market and private enterprise principles."⁵⁶ This means that by debt relief, Africa suffers more economic oppression and strangulation.

In his comprehensive book *Africa's Long Road to Development*, Kwakye demonstrated that major drastic structural changes are required in virtually all sectors of the socio-economic and political life on the African continent for real and sustained growth and development to take place. For example, unproductive colonial legacies in education, as well as in the public and civil service systems must be restructured.⁵⁷ Radical restructurings are required in international political economic arrangements, economic policy options for African countries, mobilization of capital and application of technology for the productive systems, and in politics, leadership and institutions.⁵⁸ Gross hesitation and unwillingness to undertake the necessary structural and systemic overhaul and changes for parochial political expediencies make Africa's journey to development long.

Directly impinging on the economic and social life of the continent are the following non-economic factors, such as intra-national and inter-national challenges and wranglings bothering uncertainties in governance corruption, extremes of weather conditions, as well as dire security concerns. Nor shall there be a failure to isolate, for emphasis, phenomena such as the degradation of farmlands, cash-crops, water bodies, and forest reserves, as well as environmental pollution.

Kwakye concludes his thoughts with prophetic zeal in the following excerpts:

While we expect political leaders to take the initiative in addressing the failings that have retarded Africa's development, relying on them alone to carry out this responsibility will slow progress in this regard ... The citizenry can effect change by organizing pressure groups ... The Judiciary should assert its independence from the Executive... The Media should be active and sufficiently aggressive in publishing political failings ... Every constituency should fight for the creation of the necessary institutions that would protect civil freedoms and judicial rights and place limits on discretionary official authority.⁵⁹

It would be right to suggest that Kwakye came close to mentioning the Church and giving it tasks to perform towards ensuring a more rapid development of Africa in order to eliminate poverty, disease and squalor in society. Fortunately, the Church shows awareness of the economic and poverty issues in the sacred space of ecumenism.

⁵⁴ International Monetary Fund (IMF), "International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook (October-2016)," July 9, 2017.

⁵⁵ International Monetary Fund (IMF), "International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook (October-2016)."

⁵⁶ John Kwabena Kwakye, *Africa's Long Road to Development* (Accra: Frontiers Printing & Publishing Ltd., 2011), 59-60.

⁵⁷ Kwakye, *Africa's Long Road to Development*, 10-26.

⁵⁸ Kwakye, *Africa's Long Road to Development*.

⁵⁹ Kwakye, *Africa's Long Road to Development*, 147.

African Ecumenical Efforts at Economic and Poverty Challenges

At the Congress of Third World Theologians which took place in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) in August 1976 which was the birth of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), one objective was, the sharing of theological reflection among Third World Christian theologians: to discern the ‘signs of time’, listening to the Spirit of the Risen Lord in the context of the existing division between the rich and the poor, examining the two distinctive perspectives in theology.⁶⁰

The expression “Third World” is defined to cover countries on the African, Asian and Latin American continents, as well as those that are also deprived economically elsewhere without much development and self-determination. That was a good battle line drawn, as it were. Whether the Third World (the Southern Hemisphere) is winning the economic battle or whether it is gaining any ground is another matter.

It can be said of all ecumenical organs that after dealing with the usual unity and cooperation matters, they go on, with as much concern and passion, to deal with world existential matters such as poverty, hunger, disease, bad leadership and governance, unjust and exploitative economic systems, injustice and discrimination, corruption and greed, moral decadence and destruction of world ecology. These issues impact the safety and security of each person on earth. Indeed, most congregants in Churches live their daily lives amid these realities. International debts have virtually choked and suffocated many an economy the world over.⁶¹ Thus, for example, at the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) held in Accra in 2004, there was a session which dwelt on identifying the verifiable contemporary indications of unacceptable hardships.⁶² As a result, there were profound observations and admissions about the dire economic and living conditions of many people. The General Council stated “We are challenged by the woundedness of creation itself. We see a dramatic convergence between the suffering of the people and the damage done to the rest of creation.”⁶³ Still further, they stated that “[T]he signs of the times have become more alarming and must be interpreted. The root causes of massive threats to life are, above all, the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might.”⁶⁴ Gutierrez would wonder whether such defenders of injustice have any moral authority to condemn violence against such injustice.

The General Council, after identifying the verifiable contemporary indications of unacceptable hardships, made profound confessions that are very relevant to this discourse which has Gutierrez in mind. One such confessions was, “We choose confession...to show the necessity and urgency of an active response to the challenges of our time...”⁶⁵ The matter of ‘active response’ is one serious departure of Gutierrez’s theology of Liberation from those of most African theologians and their theologies of liberation. Another confession in Accra, Ghana, which Gutierrez would applaud has to do with the meeting admitting that the integrity of the Christian faith is being increasingly questioned and the realisation that the church must not remain silent, fail or refuse to take concrete actions in respect of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization. For Gutierrez, liberation is thoroughly a spiritual enterprise beginning from faith in the God of (total) Salvation (total) liberation and, particularly, faith in God as the God of the oppressed poor.

After the confessions, the WARC General Council covenanted for justice.⁶⁶ In this regard, the Council declared:

By confessing our faith together, we covenant in obedience to God’s will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and accountable relationships. This binds us together to work for justice in the economy and the earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings.

Now we proclaim with passion that we will commit ourselves, our time and our energy to changing, renewing, and restoring the economy and the earth, choosing life, so that we and our descendants might live (Deuteronomy 30:19).⁶⁷

What would connect African theological effort with Gutierrez’s theology of liberation is about commitment of one’s self, time, as well as inexhaustible energy to changing the economic and living conditions

⁶⁰ Oborji, “African Christian Theology: Origins and Perspectives,” 7.

⁶¹ J.O.Y Mante, *The Accra Confession. 24th General Assembly of World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (Accra: Sonlife Printing Press, 2004), 26.

⁶² Mante, *The Accra Confession. 24th General Assembly of World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, 10-15.

⁶³ Mante, *The Accra Confession. 24th General Assembly of World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, 10.

⁶⁴ Mante, *The Accra Confession. 24th General Assembly of World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, 11.

⁶⁵ Mante, *The Accra Confession. 24th General Assembly of World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, 15.

⁶⁶ Mante, *The Accra Confession. 24th General Assembly of World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, 22.

⁶⁷ Mante, *The Accra Confession. 24th General Assembly of World Alliance of Reformed Churches*, 22-23.

of the oppressed poor. It does seem that African theologians do better at thinking and planning practical liberation activities at ecumenical fora than at other theological conferences.

CONCLUSION

The dire economic conditions of Africa are real and have been comprehensively articulated by Kwakye who warned that the road to development could be long if care is not taken. Gutierrez has also cautioned that processes of development must be driven by an integral liberation paradigm to ensure that even the evil status quo can be broken up. Since the God of all creation and salvation is concerned about the oppressed poor the church and its theologians ought to be actively working out the will of God for the poor so that they might have life in full abundance. There are risks involved in advocating for the poor, ‘conscientizing’ the populace against the evils of the status quo and against economic strangulation and forces behind them. Yet if the church and its theologians must do the works of Christ Jesus for the poor and the economically deprived, the risks must to be taken in their strides because “to liberate is equal to giving life.”⁶⁸ This discourse ends in the words of Gustavo Gutierrez thus:

Only authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the concrete, vital context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty. The absence of a sufficient commitment to the poor, the marginalized, and the exploited is perhaps the fundamental reason why we have no solid contemporary reflection on the witness of poverty.⁶⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Catalogue Needs of Localities: Every Church must catalogue poor living conditions in their zone or locality and the data must be known at the level of the ecumenical organs that the Churches belong to in the zone or locality. This begins the process of planning towards transformation. A working committee emerges consequentially and must be chaired ideally by the Clergy. In Ghana the organs include the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council (GPCC), Christian Council of Ghana’s Local Council of Churches, the Council of Charismatic Churches (CCC).
2. Advocacy Building and Solution Open Forum: There should be an open forum(s) in the heart of the zone involving the community leaders to brainstorm about the solutions to the problems of poor living conditions and the preferred solutions. A typical palaver meeting. This would enable advocacy and solutions to be relevant to the members of the community.
3. Communities for Hope Conferences: Return regularly to the communities for Hope Conferences to keep hope alive and to share information on progress to work on transformation as well as any practical solution found.
4. Appropriate and Relevant Theological Training: Liberation/Missional/Transformational Theology must be taught at Pastoral Formation and Leadership Training Programmes. Every Christian Denomination must wake up to the urgent need to raise and form truly transformational Pastors.
5. Incarnational Ministries in Churches and Denominations: Incarnational ministries must populate all slumps, communities of poor and deprived people. Examples include crèche, hot lunch center, clinic days, vocational training, counseling center, worship center, and financial education center.
6. Every theologian must add Advocacy for the Oppressed Poor to his or her ministry: Many a Pastor fear the challenges of the oppressed poor and this is the reason why the Gospel of Christ Jesus has not touched to the livelihood of many a church member as the Saviour would want it. Every Pastor must look out for the people at the bottom of the ladder in church. The poor must have priority attention of the Pastor.
7. Cooperative Communities of the Oppressed Poor: In unity lies strength. In unity among a large number lies formidable strength. Transformational work among the poor would naturally create solidarity among them. This would give them a presence and voice, as well as a mass movement by which they can articulate their needs and demand for justice.
8. Holistic Evangelism, Mission and Intercultural Studies: Evangelism, Mission and Intercultural Studies and their allied term must have a new face and preference for the Oppressed Poor. Salvation is holistic and it must be presented holistically. Not only the souls of the oppressed poor are poor. Their nutrition, clothing, education, income, habitat, environment and everything else about them are poor.

⁶⁸ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, xxxvii.

⁶⁹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 173.

9. World Councils of all Ecumenical Organs Require New Impetus: World Councils of all Ecumenical Organs must wake up once more to the stark realities of persisting and worsening living conditions of the Oppressed Poor. Probably we need Vatican III to birth many more theologians cut in to mode and mould of Gustavo Gutierrez.
10. Politicians and the Clergy must Peer Review each other: Politician and the Clergy must hold each to task in respect of the needs of the Oppressed Poor. The truth is the work of the church and CSOs will be enhanced greatly if the state provides the basic infrastructures such as roads, water and power, as well as schools and clinics
11. Advocacy of Media: The media must be more direct and unrelenting in taking the leadership of the church, nation and CSOs to task in respect of the dire needs of the Oppressed Poor.
12. Peer Review Surveillance between Churches and CSOs: When the churches are incarnationally present in the communities they can serve as facts-check source for donors who fund the Civil Society Organizations. Some Civil Society Organizations are alleged to be raising funds with pictures of poor living conditions of communities but fail to spend raised funds on them. Collaboration between churches and Civil Society Organizations will enhance the effective and efficient delivery of help and support to the communities.

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