

A QUEST FOR A UNIQUE AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY IN THE LIGHT OF CHARLES NYAMITI

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Abstract

European missionaries introduced the message of Jesus Christ to most Africans based on their own culture and mentality. Nyamiti has questioned this premise and solicits for a unique African Christian theology that is self-same Christian doctrine expressed and presented in accordance with what he describes as "African mentality and needs." It is in line with this that African Christian theologians are confronted with three conflicting worlds: Christian faith, African culture and modernization. Nyamiti in a quest to clear these conflicting worlds attempts to fuse the African world views and mentality with the Christian faith in order to better incarnate the message of Christ into the life of the African people.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contend for a unique African Theology and methodology as proposed by Nyamiti. He points out that there are several approaches to theology within Africa, for cultural divergences make for a plurality of theologies. His own approach is concerned with the building up of African systematic or scientific Theology which takes as its primary data the Bible, tradition and history and in which Philosophy plays an important role. He claims that his own approach, while it has historically been developed especially in the west, has a "universal bearing". African Theology therefore should be the "very self-same Catholic doctrine expressed and presented in accordance with African mentality and needs," and at the same time should be based both on Christian revelation and on African culture and situations. Nyamiti's method seeks to unite three different approaches to theology, which he calls the pastoral, the apologetical and the pedagogical.

Thus this paper investigates the unique African Theology and method as proposed by Nyamiti. This paper seeks to contend three propositions: a. Method in African theology (b) the nature of African Theology and (c) the intrinsic unity between theological method, world view and content of theology. Therefore, for the sake of clarity and coherency, we undertake an investigative examination of the notion of theology in order to better situate African Theology, and then, Nyamiti's ideas on the nature and method in African Theology and his ability to unite it with the content of Theology.

The notion of Theology

For the sake of the topic in question, we will be discussing Theology from the Christian perspective. Definitions differ as there are theologians. Thus, according to Migliore(1991),

Theology is the enterprise to construct a coherent system of Christian belief and practices based primarily upon the texts of the Old Testament and the New Testament as well as the historical traditions of the faithful. Taking St. Anselm's, theology is: 'Faith seeking understanding' (*fides quaerens intellectum*). This definition with numerous variations has a long and rich tradition. In the writings of St. Augustine it takes the form, "I believe in order that I may understand". According to St. Augustine, knowledge of God not only presupposes faith, but faith also restlessly seeks deeper understanding. Christians want to understand what they believe, what they can hope for, and what they ought to love (Migliore, 1991)

For Anselm, faith seeks understanding, and understanding brings joy. "I pray, O God, to know thee, to love thee that I may rejoice in thee." Still in line with the tradition of Augustine and Anselm, Karl Barth (1963) contends that Theology has the task of reconsidering the faith and practice of the community, "testing and rethinking it in the light of its enduring foundation, object and content... what distinguishes theology from blind assent is just its special character as 'faith seeking understanding'" (Migliore, 1991:2)

From what we have discussed above, it is apparent that the common conviction of these theologians and of the classical theological tradition generally, is that Christian faith prompts inquiry, searches for deeper understanding, dares to raise questions. Theology grows out of this dynamism of Christian faith that incites reflection, inquiry, and pursuit of the truth not yet possessed, or only partially possessed. When a people have accepted faith in Christ and the Christian doctrines themselves capable of changing their way of living, they then reflect on their faith in order to make the transformation of their lives come true in their particular situation. The message of Christ is received according to the milieu and manner of the receiver. Yet, it is impossible outside his very situation. For it is only when the people have incarnated Christ's message in their own milieu, that it transforms them. Hence, theology is a reflection of one's faith in Christ in a concrete situation.

The meaning and nature of African theology

Nyamiti's (1969) precise definition of African Theology is the very self-same Christian doctrine expressed and presented in accordance with African mentality and needs. It is his conviction that to qualify as a genuine exponent of African Theology and to acquire the title "African Theologian", there are some indispensable requirements. According to him, the scientific recommendable definition of African Theology is double-pronged: African theology in its etymological sense and African theology in the technical sense.

In its etymological sense, African theology is discourse on God and what is related to God in accordance with the African needs and mentality (Nyamiti, 1969). As such African theology is comprised of African traditional theology, for instance, African non-Christian theology as found particularly in African traditional religions imbued with mythopoeic, oralness, narratives and symbolic characteristics.

In its technical sense, African theology is African Christian Theology with focus on Christ, Christian tradition and the bible as the inevitable revelatory agents. In other words, African Christian Theology is the understanding, presentation and concrete interpretation of the Christian faith in accordance with the needs, aspirations, thought-forms and mentality of the peoples of the black continent. Hence, African Christian theology is the systematic and scientific understanding, presentation and elaboration of the Christian faith according to the needs, aspirations, thought-forms and mentality of the peoples of the black continent; a notion

which as Nyamiti explains, corresponds well with the socio-religio-philosophical and anthropological realities in the black continent.

From the above, it is apparent that African theologians of today are called to reflect on the Christian faith in the light of African cultures and socio-political situation, trying to render the Christian message understandable and relevant to their peoples. So, if Christianity is to become authentically African and if African cultures are not intended to become westernized in addition to being Christianized, a distinction has to be made between the Gospel and the culturally conditioned forms through which its content has been expressed. Moreover, Nyamiti (1969) stressed that because of the variety of cultural expressions in Africa, certain pluralism in theology is desirable, thus he writes:

African Theology will necessarily include unity and an enriching variety of cultural expressions. This implies that it will involve a plurality of theologies, although it is difficult to foretell whether such plurality will consist of different theological schools corresponding to the same systems of thinking, or different theologies corresponding to different philosophical systems. An absolutely uniform African theology is an undesirable fiction.(p.2)

Uniformity in African theology cannot be achieved because: in Africa, there are numerous tribes each with a different articulation in culture, customs, languages and belief systems. Secondly, the social, political and economic circumstances peculiar to each of us do not favour uniformity. Moreover, the theology expected from us is not merely an intellectual theoretical product in the fashion of mathematical principles; instead, it must be concrete life experience which is scarcely uniform on a continental level.

Nyamiti's methodological approach in African theology

According to Vahakangas (1999), methodology is meant to be not only the techniques of scrutinizing data but also the fundamental principles steering the intellectual enterprise, as in one's understanding of reality and theory of knowledge especially. The choice of these fundamental principles is not only a result of philosophical reasoning but also an outcome of ideological convictions. Nyamiti attempted to give a systematic approach to African Theology. African theologians work in a field of tensions between the universal message of Christianity, which is in many cases strongly flavoured by western cultural hegemony, and the African quest of preserving one's own authenticity. Then the questions are: what should be preserved of Christianity conveyed in and through western cultures to most of the African continent. How would Christianity be expressed in accordance with African mentalities and African needs? Moreover, another problem is on how to build an authentic African Theology so that it may yet be called scientific or academic. The western background and the continuing domination in the execution of academic research places the academic theologians in the face of another dilemma of trying to be at same time properly scholarly and genuinely African. Hence, can a genuinely African way of using western methodology be found?

Nyamiti's methodological approach inspiring and guiding the evolution and outlook of his thought as a pioneer member in African Theology is mainly and clearly influenced and guided not only by African situation. It is also guided by the magisterial instruction. Thus, one can see how Nyamiti's methodological approach stems from how his philosophical and religious worldview forms a harmonious whole. Among the magisterial instructions, Vatican II's *optatam totius* is outstanding in impacting on his theologization within the African context. It is from here that he borrows and profoundly utilizes: (a) the use of reason, implying the use of

the idea of social anthropology and other useful sciences like philosophy, sociology, linguistic and history; (b) the subordination of such anthropological data to Christian faith; (c) the use of analogy when ascribing African categories and other cultured elements to Christian mysteries.

He argued that logical reasoning is universal and thus a connecting principle for any kind of human thinking. Nyamiti further affirms that proper logic, used in any kind of human thought is universal and it is thus the same in any cultural sphere. This conviction contains two problems to be solved; the question of whether Revelation may be considered as basis of reflection that could be considered as a universal generalization starting point and the question whether the logic used in theology can be considered to be universal.

He further discloses that, he started his theological reflection on the meaning of the Christian mystery – first in itself and afterwards, in its relevance for our spiritual and material welfare – in the light of the African themes. In order to achieve this goal as best as possible, he tries to bring about what he termed the intrinsic employment of the cultural themes in theology, for instance, the identification of the African categories or themes with the Christian elements (mysteries) in order to allow the African themes to enter internally into the theological elaboration of revealed truth so as to form an organic part of it and thus influence its constitution, presentation, orientation and progress.

It is also crucial to take heed of Nyamiti's idea on what is involved in the originality of African theology: "its originality will not consist in the context of faith (this must be one and the same everywhere and at all times in the whole church), but in the manner of presentation, interpretation and formulation of that very same faith. This will lead to new perspectives, accents, ways of approach, categories and so on, and hence to a deeper understanding and new way of living the perennial faith of the church.

He is also deeply concerned with reiterating that among the major goals of inculturation theology is "to scrutinize in a scientific way and to probe more deeply – in the light of the African social and cultural contexts- the understanding of the Christian mysteries, in themselves first and secondly, in their relevance for our life here on earth and in the world to come. These comments point to Nyamiti's commitment to resolving the problems of African theology. He pragmatically witnesses to the above prerequisites and principles by utilizing fully these guidelines. Nyamiti's exemplarity is best reflected in his monumental book *Christ as our Ancestor: Christology from an African perspective*. Thus in his endeavour to respond to Christ's perennial question in Matthew 16:13, "Who do people say that the son of man is?" Nyamiti explains him as the Ancestor par excellence as he qualifies him as the perfect model, elevation and finality of ancestors.

The unity between theological method, world view and content of theology

On the basis of both his theological and cultural background, Nyamiti is strongly inclined to emphasize the harmony and unity of reality. He emphasized strongly the essential unity of theology, especially in the area of doctrine. For him different doctrines are not only complementary to each other but also essentially interconnected. This means that theology should be seen as an organic whole in which all the organs interact with each other. Just as Christian doctrine is essentially united and interlinked, so is also the whole of reality in Nyamiti's view. He bases this on his interpretation of the African traditional basic philosophy of the universe which he describes as "Vitalism". Nyamiti draws many insights from the Tempels and Mulago utilizing their interpretations but merging them together in his theological and

philosophical system. From this background of African holistic thinking it is clear that Nyamiti finds the use of analogy as a practical and credible basis for theological methodology.

Furthermore, Nyamiti's worldview and theological methodology are intertwined in such a way that one can maintain, on one hand, that his worldview is manifested in his theological methodology, and on the other hand, that his methodology produces his worldview as is the case with his idea of "Christ as our Ancestor". It is not only that Nyamiti's worldview has led him to formulate a certain methodology. It is also that by applying his methodology logically to his ancestral approach, Nyamiti creates new understandings and meanings of ancestorship.

Nyamiti's harmonious worldview leads him to regard theology as an organic whole which is intimately linked with the whole of the worldview. Thus, theological methodology cannot be seen as an irrelevant hobby of some distanced academic theologians but rather as a tool for adequate theologizing. Nyamiti's endeavour in using basically a Thomistic theological methodology and bringing it in contact with modern realities and a worldview basically different from that of Thomas reminds one of the strivings of Louvain transcendental Thomists and Karl Rahner. In all these cases what the scholar regards as a philosophically convincing and theologically rewarding methodology is reformulated and reinterpreted in a new intellectual environment. As such, Nyamiti's task can be seen to be more demanding and complicated than in the case of European thinkers, because in Europe there is the possibility to trace some of the continuities in the development of thought, say, from Medieval thinking to existentialism. In the case of Nyamiti, no such historical continuities between African traditional thinking and that of Thomism exist. The only direction from where there is a possibility to look for bridges between these two different thought worlds is the common human experience, mainly the essential human logical thought pattern and ways to perceive reality. In this, again, Nyamiti comes close to Karl Rahner's transcendental method. Nyamiti's holistic worldview and methodology reaches out to the world as well. His views on fusing African realities and Christianity together are not the end of his vision; he wants to head towards unity and a combined view of reality which also embraces theologies and theological methodologies from different systems. As noted before, theological methodology not only directs the way in working out the content of theology but it also reflects the basic understanding of reality to which the theologian subscribes.

Challenges facing African theologians

African is often seen by and portrayed to outsiders as a dark, poverty-stricken, crisis-ridden continent; thus, the Europeans have seen African as a continent that has nothing to offer. Genuine African theology requires cross disciplinary expertise. In addition to the biblical studies expertise needed to understand the Bible in its original cultural context, ethnographic research along with anthropological and sociological analysis are needed to help immerse the theologian indifferent African cultural worldviews. Moreover, almost all formal theological training is done in the West or by Western-trained African theologians who have been indoctrinated to Western priorities and methodologies. Many of the most successful African academics are not in touch with their own traditional cultural heritage; they may not even speak their own mother tongues, which could help shape their theological thinking.

Conclusion

A quest for a unique African Christian theology is a quest to incarnate Christianity into the life of the people of Africa. It is true that the message of Christ was brought to us by the European missionaries; this message was brought to us in their own culture and mentality. Nyamiti's aim was to fuse the African world views and mentality with the Christian faith in order to better incarnate the message of Christ into the life of the people. Thus we are reminded by the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar about what is needed: "our own theological thought which tries to answer the questions raised by our diverse historical contexts and the actual evolution of our societies; a theological thought which is at one and the same time faithful to the traditions of the church and respectful of our traditions and languages, that is, our philosophies... only an African peoples shall effectively make Christianity incarnated in the life of the people of Africa."(p.135) So far, we have been able to explore Nyamiti's significant contribution to inculturation hermeneutics in African Christian theology. As this essay has shown, he remains an exemplar of methodological sophistication, faithful to Christian orthodoxy and sensitivity to African indigenous traditions. In line with African Christian theology's quest for a Christianity that is nourished by autochthonous cultural values, Nyamiti has combined methodological reflections and practical research in an admirable manner.

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