

# A new theological landscape

## *Introducing recent African theology*

- Jacob Haasnoot\* -

The changes in the global church are clearly visible in the place where I work in South Sudan. In late 2010, my wife and I were the only mission partners of the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Kajo-Keji. Currently we have two Nigerian and three Chinese colleagues and we, as Western missionaries, are in the minority. The huge growth of the church in the Southern hemisphere<sup>1</sup> has resulted in a new missionary movement which is no longer controlled from the West.

But has there been a growth in theological reflection alongside this numerical growth? I definitely think so. I want to illustrate this fact by looking at a number of recent publications by African evangelical theologians. This article provides no more than an introduction to their theology, but I hope you will discover that the global theological landscape has become broader and more versatile than before.

### **Revision necessary**

Before we look at a number of specific publications, I will first address the question of why African theology has relevance for us as Western theologians. Of course not everyone will automatically agree with that suggestion. There may be pragmatic reasons for excluding African theology (along with Asian, and Latin American theology) from our thinking, simply because theologians cannot keep track of everything. It is for that reason that Van den Brink and Van der Kooi describe their *Christelijke Dogmatiek* as mainly Western.<sup>2</sup> It is not easy to keep up with the colourful world of World Christianity. In addition, there is an ignorance of African theology, partly because many African books are produced by publishers that are uncommon in the West. In a small way I hope to address that lack of familiarity with this article.

However, there may also be more critical reasons for this situation, including the idea that African theology may not be relevant to Europe and North America, because Africa has not gone through the Enlightenment. Their world does not correspond to the Western world and therefore their theology is, by definition, not interesting. Kwame Bediako responds by saying that Western, secular interpretative schemes possibly need revision.<sup>3</sup> African theology can help us with that revision.

### **Mission engenders theology**

But there is more. There are good reasons to broaden the Western horizon. I will mention three.

First, it is fascinating to see how young churches in Africa seek theological answers to urgent questions, questions that the West no longer asks or never has asked. Andrew Walls defines theology as Christian decision-making in critical situations.<sup>4</sup> We see critical questions being asked, especially in places where the Christian faith exceeds cultural boundaries (in missionary situations). Therefore, says Kwame Bediako: "... it is mission that engenders theology, which, in turn, should sustain mission."<sup>5</sup>

The second point is that we can learn from each other's theology. Tennent calls this the 'translatability' of theology. A unique feature of the Christian faith is that it is culturally translatable to every possible context. And the same goes for theological reflection. Tennent gives the following definition of this "theological translatability" of faith: "... the ability of the

kerygmatic essentials of the Christian faith to be discovered and restated within an infinite number of new global contexts".<sup>6</sup> Theologians in the West freely take it for granted that *their theology* is helpful for Christians in Africa, but conversely they are often not so convinced. Tite Tiénou is not very optimistic that this will change soon. He quotes with approval John Mbiti who said more than thirty years ago: "The Church has become kerygmatically universal, but is still theologically provincial."<sup>7</sup> Let me make this more specific. At what point can we learn from each other? I will mention three examples.

- a. In the Netherlands there is quite a lot of attention on deliverance ministry. In Africa there is a lot of practical experience in this area and also increasingly theological thinking about exorcism.
- b. Although we mainly hear in the news about conflict between Muslims and Christians, there are also many areas of Africa where Christians and Muslims live together well without sacrificing their beliefs. I think many around the globe can learn from the experience African Christians have in this area when it comes to Christian witness in an interfaith society.<sup>8</sup>
- c. The prosperity gospel attracts thousands in Africa. In Europe people are often critical of it (I believe rightly) but do Europeans see the plank in their own eyes? Is it not true that nowadays in many churches in Europe and North America a 'therapeutic gospel' is being proclaimed?<sup>9</sup> The similarity between the two ideas is that they both represent a hermeneutical narrowing of the gospel. How do we deal theologically with this? Should we not learn from each other?

Third, we simply cannot deny that Africa is part of the Global Church. In the *Anglican Communion*, this became obvious in the discussion about homosexuality and in other areas also the African voice will be important. Andrew Walls says, "... it is Africans and Asians and Latin Americans who will be the representative Christians, those who represents the Christian norm, the Christian mainstream, in the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries."<sup>10</sup>

### **Western theology fails**

The book that is most used in the library of the seminary where I work is Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.<sup>11</sup> The book has completely fallen apart, but it is still widely consulted. However, I expect that Grudem will slowly disappear from the *top five* theological books, because more and more books written by African theologians are being published.<sup>12</sup> Grudem is an excellent reference book, but my students are looking for answers to questions that 'even' Grudem has no answer to. I find in practice that Western theology often fails in Africa. It is too abstract, too narrow, too individualistic. It is not practical enough and not always relevant. Recently I studied the Book of Revelation with my students. If you only consult Western literature you would think that Africa does not exist, because the possible fulfilments of Revelation found in these books relate particularly to the West!

### **Not only in books**

I am therefore pleased that there is a growth in African theological publications. That does not necessarily mean, however, that we have access in South Sudan to this newer literature. Our library is made up of more than 90% of books that have been donated from the West and are now outdated. The reality for many African theological institutions is that the more recent literature is often inaccessible, simply because of the lack of financial resources.

I will limit myself in this article to a discussion of contextual theology books, but it is important to understand that contextualization of the Christian faith is also seen - especially in Africa - in the practice of believing, in songs, prayers, sermons and liturgy.<sup>13</sup> We find a beautiful

example of this in the Liturgy of the Eucharist of the Anglican Church in Kenya (1989). The blessing at the end of the service is based on a traditional Turkana curse which would be pronounced on the neighbouring tribe, the Karamoja. With a wave the Turkana sent all their problems, their trouble and the work of evil to their neighbours. In the liturgy, however, this curse is turned into a blessing. Three times they wave their arms towards the cross, so that their problems, their difficulties and the work of the devil are sent to the cross of Christ. It then ends with a wave upwards and the words: "All our hopes, we set on the risen Christ."<sup>14</sup>

### **Three themes**

Using three themes I will draw attention to some recently published African books. I will not give a review of the books, but I want to show what resources African theologians are using, how they organize their material and how the context of Africa plays a role in their writings. The three subjects describe the intersection of culture and the gospel, because that is where new answers are being sought to urgent questions and where theology finds its relevance. At the end of this tour I will draw some tentative conclusions.

#### **(1) *The spiritual world***

In the African worldview the spiritual world cannot be separated from the physical, visible world, therefore, the spiritual world is also an important topic within the Christian faith. How does the traditional worldview relate to the biblical worldview?

In 2012 the first fully African evangelical systematic theology was published by Samuel Waje Kunhiyop entitled *African Christian Theology*.<sup>15</sup> This Nigerian theologian received his PhD in the United States and is now general secretary of one of the largest denominations in Nigeria (The *Evangelical Church Winning All*). In ten chapters and 250 pages Kunhiyop covers the sorts of topics we may expect in a traditional systematic theology. The author says in the introduction that he does not want to rebel against Western theology. His purpose is "... to articulate a theology that originates from an authentic search for the meaning of Scripture in order to apply it to African life today."<sup>16</sup> The author does not shy away from discussions but remains close to the Bible in his argumentation. Generally, he does not engage in an in-depth discussion with other theologians, but this may be due to the limited scope of the book. Kunhiyop often chooses a moderate position. The footnotes refer overwhelmingly to Western sources, yet this is clearly an *African* systematic theology. The African context is present on every page and also plays a role in the choice of subjects. In the chapter on 'God and Spirits' Kunhiyop devotes eleven pages to 'The Spirit World'<sup>17</sup> in a book of 250 pages. In *Christelijke dogmatiek* by Van den Brink and Van der Kooi the Dutch reader must make do with a maximum of two pages in a book of 660 pages.<sup>18</sup> This reflects the different worldviews represented in these books. This justifies Andrew Walls' comment that: "Western theology is not big enough for Africa".<sup>19</sup>

Kunhiyop begins his section on the spiritual world with a brief description of how African traditional religion speaks about this topic. He argues that the Bible must be our guide in this area. "But that doesn't mean that we have to reject everything in African Traditional Religion."<sup>20</sup> The author then describes good spirits (angels), evil spirits (demons) and finally discusses how Christians should deal with the spiritual world. The African context is expressly referred to. He states that not every disease is caused by demons. God has given us medicine through medical science and we should use it, yet there *are* diseases that are clearly caused by demons. In those latter situations, prayer and deliverance are needed. It is imperative that we learn to distinguish these different situations related to disease, according to Kunhiyop.<sup>21</sup> He fails to tell us, however, exactly how to make that distinction.

The author does not leave out difficult questions from the African context. He writes: "... one hears stories of women who claim that they have had sexual intercourse with spiritual

beings."<sup>22</sup> Kunhiyop then looks at some biblical passages and concludes: "These beliefs [...] cannot be accepted as proof that spiritual beings can procreate. All that can be said is speculative. Scripture is silent on this subject."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, Kunhiyop discusses the unhealthy attention that there is among some Christians on the devil and demonic activity. This leads to anxiety amongst believers and gives too little attention to the finished work of the cross, to the Holy Spirit and to angels. In eight points the author emphasizes the sovereignty and power of God over evil. Our job is to preach the gospel and to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. "Cursing or abusing celestial beings like Satan and evil beings is not our mandate."<sup>24</sup>

In the African worldview the ancestors are also related to the visible world. In the chapter 'Salvation and the Christian Life' Kunhiyop pays attention to this belief in ancestors. He explains that in African traditional religion, the ancestral spirits act as mediators between humans and the spiritual world. The only way to combat this belief in ancestors is to present Christ as the great Mediator, who made the role of ancestors superfluous.<sup>25</sup> Kunhiyop tries to find the narrow ancient biblical path between, traditional customs and modern charismatic novelties. That the spiritual world exists and that this world affects our visible world is not subject to debate.

## **(2) Ethnicity**

The second topic is ethnicity. As I write this article there is a conflict in South Sudan between the government and a former vice president and his supporters. Unfortunately, this conflict has ethnic dimensions. The church can only play a conciliatory role in these type of conflicts, as it has a clear vision on ethnicity.

For that reason a training manual on ethnicity has been developed under the title *Restoring the Beauty and Blessing of Ethnic Diversity*.<sup>26</sup> The African authors that have developed this material have come from the *Africa International University* (AIU) in Nairobi and the organization *African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries* (ALARM). I used this book in South Sudan for a lecture series on ethnicity. Out of twelve titles in the bibliography in the back of the book, ten come from a Western origin and two from an African origin. We also see this same dynamic in the text. On the one hand, there are social science definitions used from Western sources (for example, the definition of an ethnic group), whilst on the other hand, the African context is clearly present (e.g. in a case study about a conflict over land ownership). The book is really intended as a course textbook. It begins with advice on how to use the book and then the theme is clearly elaborated. First, it is about what ethnicity is. It then follows the causes, manifestations and effects of the negative use of ethnicity. The last two chapters give a biblical response to the challenges surrounding ethnicity and show how we can highlight the good aspects of ethnicity. In an appendix, attention is paid to ethnic reconciliation. Each chapter begins with a cartoon in which the theme is portrayed in an African context.

The authors substantiate their message with particular reference to the Bible. In addition, the socio-political situation in Africa is mentioned. I will give a few examples. When it comes to a "biblical perspective on ethnicity" it refers to creation, the conciliatory role of the church and the vision in Revelation of all nations and tribes worshipping God and the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).<sup>27</sup> Regarding creation, the authors cite three elements: the beauty of diversity, every man reflects God's image and the fact that we have all descended from Adam and Eve ("All people [...] share a common origin and ancestor").<sup>28</sup> Later the writers show how different political systems (colonialism, democracy and dictatorship) have used negative ethnicity and still use this. What is the biblical solution to the negative aspects of ethnicity? The book comes up with the following remedies: God wants us to bless the nations and He calls us to promote justice and to pursue peace for all people. Thereby God redeems this world and He

breaks down the ethnic 'walls'. It is our calling to be like Christ and to love people of every ethnic group, whatever their social status.<sup>29</sup>

### *Ethnocentrism*

We also see how Samuel Ngewa deals with this same subject in his commentary on Galatians in the *Africa Bible Commentary Series*.<sup>30</sup> Ngewa is a professor of New Testament at the *Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology* (NEGST). The commentaries in this series have the following characteristics: they are written in understandable English, they are divided into 'sermon units', they give African examples and applications, they contain questions for further discussion and they include endnotes with more specialized information. The bibliography in this commentary on Galatians refers only to Western sources. In the commentary on Galatians 2:15 (the difference between Jews and Gentiles) Ngewa deals briefly with ethnocentrism. Paul does not claim that the Jews are better than the Gentiles, says Ngewa. He uses 'gentle irony' to show that Jews have been given a privileged place in God's plan of salvation. With examples from his own family situation and from his time studying in America, Ngewa shows that ethnocentrism is sin. He writes that: "Every people group has its own strengths and weaknesses."<sup>31</sup> In the African context, this statement is not obvious.

### **(3) Prosperity Gospel**

Finally, we look at the so-called prosperity gospel, which is prominent in many major cities in Africa. In my classes on this subject I have used the book by the Nigerian, Femi Adeleye: *Preachers of a Different Gospel*.<sup>32</sup> The author lives in Ghana and is the *associate general secretary* of the student movement IFES. He tells many anecdotes and quotes extensively from the literature about (African) prosperity preachers. To support his views he also refers to western authors such as Tozer, Wiersbe and Stott. The arrangement of the material is loosely associative. From the title it is clear that Adeleye does not like this type of theology at all. He quotes regularly, with disapproval, the Nigerian prosperity preacher David Oyedepo who says, "No one under this ministry is permitted to be poor, nor programmed for affliction. [...] God sent me for your financial rescue."<sup>33</sup>

Adeleye calls this the "champagne gospel". The author outlines how the charismatic movement in Africa ended up in troubled water under the influence of Americans such as Kenneth Copeland. He shows how prosperity preachers misuse biblical exegesis and how people are deceived with the promise of luxury and wealth. He provides many examples from the African situation. The author strangely does not make the link between prosperity faith and the traditional African worldview in which prosperity plays an important role. Ultimately, the prosperity gospel is, according to the author, bad news for poor Africans because there is no structural change.<sup>34</sup> What, according to Adeleye, is the future of the Church in Africa? He uses the church in the West as an example that should not be imitated: "When we come of age, do we become like parts of America where the "blessing" of prosperity has allowed materialism to compete with the love of God?"<sup>35</sup> The Church in Africa only has a future if it stands for authentic Christianity. "The chief goal of the church is not just to have a good time or to be materially prosperous. We are called to be witnesses to God's salvation plan for humanity."<sup>36</sup>

### **Theology for Life**

What can we say on the basis of this tour of the newer African evangelical theology? Because this is only a brief introduction I will give some tentative observations. The authors themselves differ, but we can observe a number of similarities:

- We see that these theologians use lots of Western books. That is understandable. Western theology is still the norm and many of these theologians have studied in the West. I expect this to change in the coming years.
- We also see that these authors remain close to the Bible. It is important for them to support their views from the Bible with direct reference to the text. They can be very uninhibited and free, because for them the Bible is plainly God's word.
- It is also striking that the books listed are very practical, focusing on all aspects of life and rooted in the African context. Theology is for them first of all theology-for-life, theology-for-the-every-day.
- Finally, this theology is always focused on the “we” – the family, the group, society: "I am because we are."<sup>37</sup>

Maybe this African way of practicing theology is less creative, less surprising or less innovative than Westerners would like, but it is relevant for Africa and it also shows up blind spots in Western theology. My observations are similar to the five characteristics that Tennent ascribes to Christian theology in the majority world:

1. These Christians accept the authority of the Bible and are, according to Western ideas, theologically conservative, orthodox and traditional.
2. Christians in the majority world are more often conservative in moral and ethical issues.
3. These young churches are more open than the Western churches to take on their Christian responsibilities when it comes to poverty and social justice.
4. These young churches have experience of making clear the uniqueness of the Gospel in a context of religious pluralism.
5. Christians in the majority world better understand the community dimensions (rather than just the individual) of the teaching of the New Testament.<sup>38</sup>

I hope that in the coming years we will meet each other more and that the world church will be able to share theological insights with one another, so that we “together with all the Lord’s holy people, [will be able] to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3: 18-19). Tennent says: "We have much to learn as well as to relearn from Africa, although there is also much that our own heritage, history and collective Christian memory have to teach Africa. It's time for a truly mutual exchange."<sup>39</sup>

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> T.C. Tennent, *Theology in the context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 8, says that "about 67% of the number of Christians now live in the southern hemisphere". See [www.globalchristianity.org](http://www.globalchristianity.org) for more statistical information.

<sup>2</sup> G. van den Brink & C. van der Kooi, *Christelijke Dogmatiek* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Kwame Bediako, "Conclusion: The Emergence of World Christianity and the Remaking of Theology", in: WR Burrows et al., *Understanding World Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 246.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Tite Tiénou, "Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity", in: G. Ott et al. (eds.), *Globalizing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 39.

<sup>5</sup> Kwame Bediako, 2011, 248. Italics in the original.

<sup>6</sup> Tennent, 2007, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Tite Tiénou, 2006, 45.

<sup>8</sup> See for example: John Azumah, *My Neighbour's Faith, Islam Explained for Christians* (HippoBooks, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> See for example: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/june/feel-good-faith-of-evangelicals.html>

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Turning That Which Is Already There toward Christ", in: WR Burrows et al (Eds), *Understanding World Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 208.

<sup>11</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (IVP, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> HippoBooks (an imprint of Word Alive, ACTS, Step, and Zondervan) currently provides regular books of African evangelical theologians, including the *Africa Bible Commentary Series*. There are also Langham Monographs ([www.langhamcatalogue.org](http://www.langhamcatalogue.org)), books by authors from the southern hemisphere. *Evangel Publishing House* in Nairobi ([www.evangelpublishing.org](http://www.evangelpublishing.org)) is a small national publisher. I am very curious about the *African Study Bible* being worked on ([www.africastudybible.com](http://www.africastudybible.com)). Not evangelical, but interesting is the Roman Catholic publisher *Paulines Africa* ([www.paulinesafrica.org](http://www.paulinesafrica.org)). An important source of information is *Booknotes for Africa* with short reviews of theological books from and about Africa ([www.theoledafrica.org/BookNotes/Index/](http://www.theoledafrica.org/BookNotes/Index/)).

<sup>13</sup> For examples of contextualization: Jaap Haasnoot, "U zult niemand vergiftigen", in: *Zending nú*, July 2012, 7-9.

<sup>14</sup> G. Kings & G. Morgan, *Offerings from Kenya to Anglicanism: Liturgical Texts and Contexts-including 'A Kenyan Service of Holy Communion'*, (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001), 15, 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Hippo Books, 2012). The same author: Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Hippo Books, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 2012, xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 2012, 53-63.

<sup>18</sup> G. van den Brink & C. van der Kooi, 2012. Based on the words "geesten," "exorcisme" and "bezetenheid" in the subject index.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Kwame Bediako, 2011, 254.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 2012, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 2012, 57-58.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 2012, 58-59.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 2012, 59.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 2012, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, 2012, 135-139.

<sup>26</sup> AIU & ALARM, *Restoring the Beauty and Blessing of Ethnic Diversity, A Training Manual on Ethnicity* (Nairobi, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> *Restoring the Beauty ...*, 2007, 23-25.

<sup>28</sup> *Restoring the Beauty ...*, 2007, 24.

<sup>29</sup> *Restoring the Beauty ...*, 2007, 48-54.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel M. Ngewa, *Galatians*, Africa Bible Commentary Series (Hippo Books, 2010). The same author: Samuel M. Ngewa, *The Gospel of John*, A Commentary for Pastors, Teachers and Preachers (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Samuel M. Ngewa, 2010, 78-80.

<sup>32</sup> Femi Adeleye Bitrus, *Preachers of a Different Gospel* (Hippo Books: 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Quoted by Femi Adeleye, 2011, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Femi Adeleye, 2011, 102-106.

<sup>35</sup> Femi Adeleye, 2011, 122.

<sup>36</sup> Femi Adeleye, 2011, 135.

<sup>37</sup> A saying of John Mbiti: 'I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am'. Quoted in Kings G. & G. Morgan, 2001, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Tennent, 2007, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Tennent, 2007, 106.