

THÉOLOGIE CHRÉTIENNE AFRICAINE TEOLOGIA CRISTÃ AFRICANA AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Nicée à 1700 ans

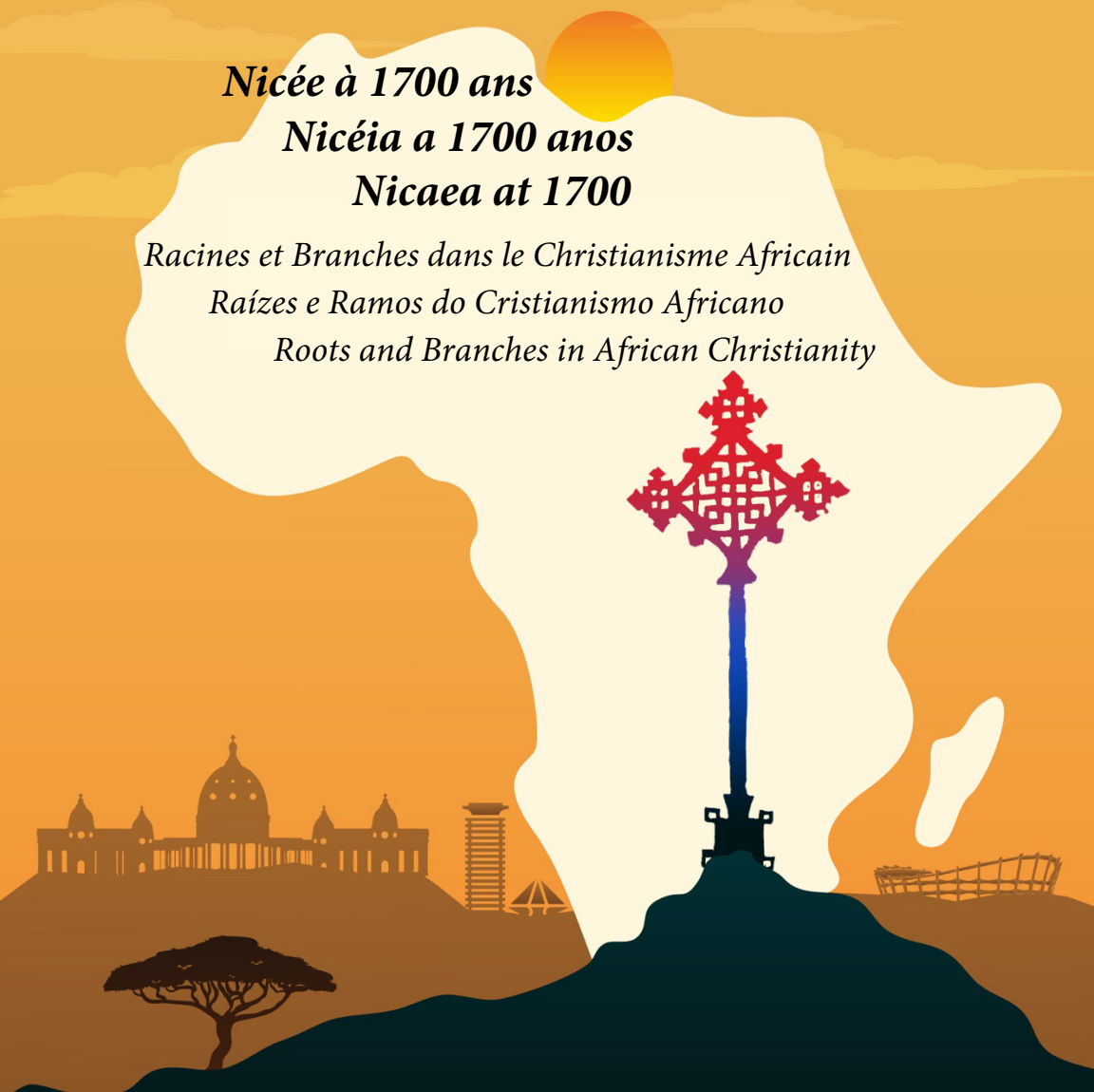
Nicéia a 1700 anos

Nicaea at 1700

Racines et Branches dans le Christianisme Africain

Raízes e Ramos do Cristianismo Africano

Roots and Branches in African Christianity



Journal of the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa
Revue de l'Association Chrétienne de Théologie et d'Éducation en Afrique
Revista da Associação Cristã de Teologia e Educação em África

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African Christian Theology

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ACTEA

NAIROBI | KINSHASA

Théologie Chrétienne Africaine

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The articles in *African Christian Theology* (ACT) reflect the opinions of the authors and reviewers and do not necessarily represent those of the Editors or of ACTEA.

All submissions are subject to double-blind peer review. Unsolicited submissions are welcome, though not guaranteed of publication in the journal. Manuscripts and reviews may be sent to submissions@AfricanChristianTheology.org. Queries and other communications may be addressed to the managing editors at Editors@AfricanChristianTheology.org

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Les articles de *Théologie Chrétienne Africaine* (TCA) reflètent les opinions des auteurs et des évaluateurs et ne représentent pas nécessairement celles des rédacteurs ou d'ACTEA.

Toutes les soumissions font l'objet d'un examen par les pairs en double aveugle. Les soumissions spontanées sont les bienvenues, mais leur publication dans la revue n'est pas garantie. Les manuscrits et les critiques peuvent être envoyés à submissions@AfricanChristianTheology.org. Les questions et autres communications peuvent être adressés aux Directeurs-Éditeurs à l'adresse suivante :

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African Christian Theology is the academic journal of the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA). The mission of ACTEA is to strengthen theological education through accreditation, scholarship, and support services to serve the church and transform society. The journal is one way in which ACTEA engages theological educators and church leaders in addressing relevant issues facing the church and society in Africa. *African Christian Theology* serves the whole of Africa and provides a venue for conversations between different regions of Africa, as well as an organ through which African voices can address World Christianity at large. Following in the footsteps of Kwame Bediako, Byang Kato, Kä Mana, Lamin Sanneh, Andrew F. Walls, and Isaac Zokoué, the journal promotes World Christianity perspectives through deep engagement with African contextual realities. Articles are published in English, French, and Portuguese; each article has a trilingual abstract in those languages.

ACTEA was founded in 1976 by the Theological and Christian Education Commission of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA). Under its continued sponsorship, ACTEA operates with internal autonomy in the accreditation of programmes of theological education throughout Africa, in order to stimulate the improvement and standardization of such programmes, and in order to secure academic recognition for such programmes wherever possible, especially among the constituencies of these institutions in Africa and among similar institutions and their constituencies overseas. ACTEA is a founding and constituent member of the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE). ACTEA maintains offices in Nairobi and Kinshasa and can be found online at acteaweb.org. For further information on any aspect of ACTEA, please email the Executive Administrator at admin@acteaweb.org and copy the Executive Director at director@acteaweb.org.

The colours of ACTEA's logo are blue, red, and gold. Blue signifies royalty and speaks to ACTEA's efforts in raising a royal priesthood of God's servants throughout Africa. Red is the colour of blood and symbolises the redemptive act of Christ on the cross. Gold represents the preciousness of God's Word and the work which God's people do. Gold also reflects ACTEA's mission of prophetic proclamation of glorious hope in Christ, to African peoples first and then to the world, through theological education.

<https://africanchristiantheology.org/>

Théologie Chrétienne Africaine est la revue scientifique de l'Association Chrétienne de Théologie et d'Éducation en Afrique (ACTEA). La mission d'ACTEA est de renforcer l'éducation théologique par l'accréditation, la recherche et les services de soutien afin de servir l'église et de transformer la société. La revue est l'un des moyens par lesquels ACTEA stimule et implique les enseignants en théologie et les responsables d'église à aborder les questions pertinentes auxquelles sont confrontées l'église et la société en Afrique. *Théologie Chrétienne Africaine* est au service de l'ensemble de l'Afrique et constitue un lieu de dialogue entre les différentes régions d'Afrique. Elle sert ainsi d'organe par lequel les voix africaines peuvent s'adresser au christianisme mondial (« World Christianity ») dans son ensemble. Suivant les traces de Kwame Bediako, Byang Kato, Kā Mana, Lamin Sanneh, Andrew F. Walls, et Isaac Zokoué, la revue promeut les perspectives du christianisme mondial à travers un engagement profond avec les réalités contextuelles africaines. Les articles sont publiés en anglais, en français, et en portugais ; chaque article est accompagné d'un résumé trilingue dans ces langues.

ACTEA a été fondée en 1976 par la Commission d'Éducation Théologique et Chrétienne de l'Association des Évangéliques en Afrique (AEA). Sous le parrainage continu de l'AEA, ACTEA opère avec une autonomie interne dans l'accréditation des programmes d'éducation théologique à travers l'Afrique, afin de stimuler l'amélioration et la normalisation de ces programmes, et d'assurer la reconnaissance académique de ces programmes partout où cela est possible, notamment parmi les circonscriptions de ces institutions en Afrique et parmi les institutions similaires et leurs circonscriptions à l'étranger. ACTEA est un membre fondateur et constitutif du Conseil International pour l'Éducation Théologique Évangélique (en anglais, International Council for Evangelical Theological Education ou ICETE). ACTEA a des bureaux à Nairobi et à Kinshasa et peut être contactée en ligne à l'adresse suivante : acteaweb.org. Pour plus d'informations sur n'importe quel aspect d'ACTEA, veuillez envoyer un courriel au Directeur Francophone à directeur.francophone@acteaweb.org et une copie au Directeur Exécutif à director@acteaweb.org.

Les couleurs du logo d'ACTEA sont le bleu, le rouge, et l'or. Le bleu signifie la royauté et évoque les efforts d'ACTEA pour élever un sacerdoce royal de serviteurs de Dieu à travers l'Afrique. Le rouge est la couleur du sang et symbolise l'acte rédempteur du Christ sur la croix. L'or représente la valeur de la Parole de Dieu et le travail accompli par le peuple de Dieu. L'or reflète également la mission d'ACTEA, celle de la proclamation prophétique de l'espérance glorieuse en Christ, aux peuples africains d'abord et au monde ensuite, par le biais de l'éducation théologique.

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Teologia Cristã Africana é a revista académica da Associação Cristã de Teologia e Educação em África (ACTEA). A missão da ACTEA é reforçar a educação teológica através de acreditação, pesquisa e serviços de apoio para servir a igreja e transformar a sociedade. A revista é uma das formas através das quais a ACTEA envolve educadores teológicos e líderes da igreja na abordagem de questões relevantes que a igreja e a sociedade em África enfrentam. A *Teologia Cristã Africana* serve toda a África e proporciona um local para conversas entre diferentes regiões de África, bem como um órgão através do qual as vozes africanas podem participar no diálogo de assuntos do cristianismo mundial (“World Christianity”). Seguindo os passos de Kwame Bediako, Byang Kato, Kā Mana, Lamin Sanneh, Andrew F. Walls, e Isaac Zokoué, a revista promove as perspectivas do cristianismo mundial através de um profundo envolvimento com as realidades contextuais africanas. Os artigos são publicados em inglês, francês e português; cada artigo tem um resumo trilingue nessas línguas.

A ACTEA foi estabelecida em 1976 pela Comissão de Educação Teológica e Cristã da Associação de Evangélicos em África (AEA). Sob o seu patrocínio contínuo, a ACTEA opera com autonomia interna na acreditação de programas de educação teológica em toda a África, a fim de estimular a melhoria e a padronização de tais programas, e a fim de assegurar o reconhecimento académico de tais programas sempre que possível, especialmente entre os stakeholders destas instituições em África e entre instituições semelhantes e os seus stakeholders no estrangeiro. A ACTEA é um membro fundador e constituinte do Conselho Internacional para a Educação Teológica Evangélica (ICETE). A ACTEA tem escritórios em Nairobi e Kinshasa e pode ser encontrada online em acteaweb.org. Para mais informações sobre qualquer aspeto da ACTEA, envie um e-mail para o Administrador Executivo em admin@acteaweb.org com cópia para o Diretor Executivo em director@acteaweb.org.

As cores do logótipo da ACTEA são o azul, o vermelho e o dourado. O azul significa realeza e fala dos esforços da ACTEA para erguer um sacerdócio real dos servos de Deus em toda a África. O vermelho é a cor do sangue e simboliza o ato redentor de Cristo na cruz. O ouro representa a preciosidade da Palavra de Deus e o trabalho que o povo de Deus realiza. O ouro também reflete a missão da ACTEA de proclamação profética da gloriosa esperança em Cristo, primeiro aos povos africanos e depois ao mundo, através da educação teológica.

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(AICs refers to African Indigenous Churches, African Initiated Churches, and/or African Independent Churches.)

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(EICs est un anacronyme anglais qui désigne Églises indépendantes africaines, églises indigènes africaines, églises initiées africaines, et/ou églises indépendantes africaines.)

Arte da capa criada por Wexer Creative, Nairobi e Mombasa, Quênia e © 2024–2025 pela ACTEA. As silhuetas dos edifícios são da Basílica de Nossa Senhora da Paz em Yamoussoukro, na Côte d'Ivoire, a maior edifício da igreja do mundo, e o Centro Internacional de Convenções Kenyatta em Nairobi, Quênia, e do Teatro Nacional da Nigéria, em Lagos. Os símbolos, incluindo a acácia e a cruz etíope, representam o compromisso da revista para com todas as regiões de África, urbanas e rurais, anglófonas, francófonas e lusófonas (bem como arabófonas), e para com todas as tradições cristãs africanas, protestantes, católicas romanas, ortodoxas, pentecostais e IIAs. A cruz no centro de África, concebida a partir de uma fotografia de uma cruz etíope exposta na casa de um dos nossos redactores-gerais, transmite tanto o compromisso evangélico central da revista como o seu compromisso com a africanidade.

(IIAs é um anacrónimo que se refere a igrejas indígenas africanas, igrejas iniciadas em África e/ou igrejas independentes africanas.)

The specialist review journal, *BookNotes for Africa*, published from 1996–2019, offered short academic reviews of recent Africa-related publications relevant for informed Christian reflection in Africa. Because of its importance, ACTEA was happy to promote *BookNotes for Africa* to its constituent schools. In 2018, the over 1,200 reviews published in issues 1–30 were published by Langham Global Library in a permanent reference collection, *Christian Reflection in Africa: Review and Engagement*, edited by Paul Bowers. A second enlarged edition including reviews from issues 31–40 together with a number of more recent reviews is forthcoming.

Inspired by the legacy of *BookNotes for Africa*, the editors hope that the book review section of *African Christian Theology* will be as robust and as helpful. This section of the journal includes both critical review essays and short book note style reviews. While the majority of books reviewed have been published recently, as is customary, we will sometimes publish retrospective reviews of older texts.

La revue spécialisée, *BookNotes for Africa*, ('Notes de Livres pour l'Afrique'), publiée de 1996 à 2019, proposait courtes critiques académiques de publications récentes liées à l'Afrique et pertinentes pour une réflexion chrétienne éclairée en Afrique. En raison de son importance, ACTEA a été heureux de promouvoir *BookNotes for Africa* auprès de ses écoles constitutives. En 2018, les plus de 1 200 comptes rendus publiés dans les numéros 1 à 30 ont été publiés par Langham Global Library dans une collection de référence permanente, *Christian Reflection in Africa : Review and Engagement*, sous la direction de Paul Bowers. Une deuxième édition révisée comprenant les comptes rendus des numéros 31 à 40 ainsi qu'un certain nombre de comptes rendus plus récents est à venir.

Inspirés par l'héritage de *BookNotes for Africa*, les éditeurs espèrent que la section des critiques de livres de *Théologie Chrétienne Africaine* sera aussi solide et utile. Cette section de la revue comprend à la fois des essais critiques et de courts comptes-rendus sous forme de notes de lecture. Bien que la majorité des livres analysés aient été publiés récemment, nous publierons parfois des analyses rétrospectives de textes plus anciens.

A revista especializada, *BookNotes for Africa* ('Notas de Livro para África'), publicada de 1996 a 2019, oferecia pequenas resenhas acadêmicas de publicações recentes relacionadas com África, relevantes para uma reflexão cristã informada em África. Devido à sua importância, a ACTEA teve o prazer de promover a *BookNotes for Africa* junto das escolas que a constituem. Em 2018, as mais de 1.200 resenhas publicadas nos números 1–30 foram publicadas pela Langham Global Library numa coleção de referência permanente, *Christian Reflection in Africa: Review and Engagement* ('Reflexão Cristã em África: Recensão e Engajamento'), editada por Paul Bowers. Está a ser preparada uma segunda edição alargada que inclui as resenhas dos números 31–40, bem como algumas resenhas mais recentes.

Inspirados pelo legado da *BookNotes for Africa*, os editores esperam que a secção de resenhas de livros da *Teologia Cristã Africana* seja tão robusta e útil. Esta secção da revista inclui ensaios de resensão crítica e pequenas resenhas de livros. Embora a maioria dos livros recensados tenha sido publicada recentemente, como é habitual, publicaremos por vezes resenhas retrospectivas de textos mais antigos.

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EDITORIAL

Nicaea at 1700

Roots and Branches in African Christianity

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“We believe”
— The Nicene Creed¹

This issue of *African Christian Theology* is a themed issue celebrating the seventeenth centennial of the Nicene Creed. For the majority of Christians around the world, the Nicene Creed of 325 and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 remain normative.² But many dismiss Nicene articulations of Christian faith as a corrupted hellenization of Christianity. Calls to *de-hellenize* Christianity are as common as calls for decolonization.³ In June 2025, a member of the African Theological Fellowship (ATF) referred in ATF’s WhatsApp group to “the ontological Christology handed down to the African by her European colonial slavemasters, bathed in European philosophy and culture” In far

¹ Whereas the later Apostles’ Creed begins with the grammatically singular “I believe” (*credo* in Latin; it is from this term that the English word ‘creed’ is derived), the earlier Nicene and Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds each begin with the plural “We believe” (Πιστεύομεν / *Pisteúomen*). While the singular form no doubt arose from the importance of an individual owning his or her own baptismal confession of faith, the plural form *we believe* can emphasize the communitarian nature of Christian faith. While we exercise πίστις (*pistis*, ‘faith, belief, allegiance’) as individuals, we do not walk the path of faith alone, but in community with other believers.

² The Nicene Creed was articulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325. A clarified revision of the Nicene Creed was articulated by the Council of Constantinople in 381. In older English texts, the term *Niceno-Constantinopolitan* is frequently used, more closely reflecting the spelling of the Latin, *Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanus*. But *Nicene-Constantinopolitan* is the more common usage today.

³ See the discussion on this point in Ernst M. Conradie and Teddy C. Sakupapa, “Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity’ or ‘The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity’?,” 367–370 and 375.

too many ways in the modern era, Europeans and Euro-Americans were unaware of the ways in which their expression of Christian faith was inherently contextual, “bathed in European philosophy and culture,” as my colleague aptly stated. Two often, they confused their culture and language with Christianity. Not infrequently, this continues to be the case. Recognizing that *all* theologizing is contextual and culturally contingent is absolutely necessary.

This recognition assumes an answer to the question, *Does culture matter?*, which may be formulated more specifically as *does culture play an important role in our theological formulations?* As for me, I am convinced that culture does matter, but it remains a question as to *how* culture matters. What is the appropriate role, including limitations on that role, for culture — including the philosophies inherent in our worldviews, both explicit and implicit — in our theologizing? Different cultures ask different questions. The answers given by brilliant theologians a thousand years ago, or five hundred years ago, in England or France or Germany might not be pertinent to our African contexts, simply because here in Africa we are asking different questions to which traditional Western Christian theology may have no answers. Allow me to restate my question: *When we theologize, does culture matter? If culture matters, what is its appropriate role and function?* Specifically, within the setting of the African contextual realities, what is the appropriate role and function of African culture in our (Christian) theologizing, that is, in how we express the truth of the Gospel and its implications for how we live?

Turning specifically to the questions of christology which lay behind the deliberations of the Council of Nicaea in 325, on the surface my ATF colleague’s statement seems to ignore the fact that trinitarian christology was first robustly expressed in *Africa* and *Asia* rather than in Europe — insofar as our ontological Christology is a contextual theology, it represents a *bathing in African* and *Asian* philosophies and cultures as much as, or more than, in European ones. Nicene (and Nicene-Constantinopolitan) christology has roots deep in Africa. When the *African* theologian Tertullian first coined the term *trinitas*, in Latin, he was trying to make sense of the Israelite/Jewish creed, the *Shema* — “Hear, O Israel, YHWH our God, YHWH is one” (Deut 6:4) — together with the Church’s experience of the Resurrected Jesus. Notably, he was not creating a new doctrine — he was just more concisely expressing what the Church had long believed, confessed, and experienced. Importantly, we should recall that Latin was an *African* vernacular Christian language for many generations before it became a Christian language in Rome, or anywhere else in Europe.⁴

Consider the giant of “ontological christology” — this was Athanasius, an African (not a Greek colonist). While Athanasius was admittedly cosmopolitan, he was equally at home in multicultural Alexandria as in the African villages of

⁴ See Andrew F. Walls, “Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect,” 87.

the Nile valley. His christology was no different than that of Antony the Great, the African holy man who never learned Greek but only spoke the African vernacular of his ancestors. The best known systematic trinitarian theology surviving from the patristic era may be that of Augustine (354–430),⁵ a man who referred to himself and his fellow bishops in the region as “us Africans.”⁶ Many point to “Constantine!” and assume that both the Nicene Council and the Nicene Creed were nothing more than a tool of Empire. This mischaracterization, however, ignores historical realities. Though many assume that the Council of Nicaea “took place in the social context of the Church’s position as the favored religion of the Roman State,”⁷ this is incorrect. The Council of Nicaea took place in 325, twelve years after the Edict of Milan (313) removed Christianity from the list of illegal religions, and the Christians bishops certainly had some favor from the Emperor, but at this point they did yet not have more favor than the priests of traditional religions. Arius, himself an African Berber, was ordained as a presbyter the same year as the Edict of Milan. But the controversy arose when Arius felt that the bishop of Alexandria was flirting with the older heresy of Sabellianism/Monarchianism. The Arian Controversy arose from a debate between competing African answers to questions that concerned African Christians.

Moreover, the Nicene Council was truly ecumenical, with delegates attending from outside of the Roman Empire — from Armenia, Georgia, the Sassanid Persian Empire, and from India. In Persia, adherence to Nicene orthodoxy was arguably a politically subversive act, undermining empire. For a significant period of time, this was also true in the Roman Empire itself. The victory of Nicene orthodoxy was not certain. When the Roman Emperors, with all their might, were trying to convert the whole Christian world to either Arian or semi-Arian christology, the African Athanasius was sent into exile multiple times rather than give up his African christology. This is why the Christian tradition in the West came to speak of *Athanasius contra mundum* (Latin: ‘Athanasius against the world’). The frequent exiling of various champions of Nicene orthodoxy by imperial authorities is proof enough that the orthodox (Nicene) Christianity was certainly *not* “the favored religion of the Roman State” during this time. When the Roman Emperor Constantius II (r. 317–361), the

⁵ Augustine’s *De Trinitate* deserves its fame. But Christianity was polycentric in its origins, and recognizing its polycentricity and multicultural and multilingual nature is the necessary correction to misguided eurocentricity. Let us not make a similar error of insisting on afrocentricity. Thus it is worth mentioning that the *De Trinitate* written by Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310 – c. 357) is arguably superior to Augustine’s, even though Augustine’s has been far more influential in Western Christianity, because Hilary drew more deeply from the Greek theology of northeast Africa and west Asia. Like Athanasius, Hilary was exiled by imperial authority for his steadfast commitment to Nicene orthodoxy.

⁶ Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustin* 138.4.19 (NPNF1 1:697).

⁷ So James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 107.

son of Constantine the Great, wrote to Ezana, the Christian king of Aksum (Ethiopia), to press him to reject Athanasius and to accept the imperially-appointed Arian bishop, Ezana refused (with the support of the Aksumite church leaders).

I admit that some contemporary complaints about Nicene trinitarian jargon are fair — e.g., Kenyan theologian Jesse Mgambi notes that its use of ‘persons’ (and presumably of *homoousios* and *homoiousios* as well!) is so foreign to African contexts as to be simply unhelpful⁸ and African American theologian James Cone observes that today

the *homoousia* question is not a black question. Blacks do not ask whether Jesus is one with the Father or divine and human, though the orthodox formulations are implied in their language. They ask whether Jesus is walking with them, whether they can call him up on the “telephone of prayer” and tell him all about their troubles.⁹

But when Cone asserts that “who Christ is,” as articulated by Nicene christology, “was controlled by the Greek view of what God had to do to save humanity,”¹⁰ he unfortunately whitewashes the *africanity* of Athanasius, his deep roots in Egyptian/Coptic — that is *African* — language and culture, and the way that African Fathers of the Early Church such as Athanasius and Augustine were, in fact, answering *African* questions.

While I support calls for decolonization (and de-proselytization), including of Christian theology, as well as calls for addressing contemporary contexts in our theologizing, historian Robert Louis Wilken revisits the value of this ancient contextual theology:

The notion that the development of early Christian thought

⁸ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 7. Greek-speaking Nicene orthodoxy recognizes that God the Son is *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος, ‘of the same essence or being’) with God the Father. The Arian heresy proclaimed that Christ is only *homoiousios* (ὁμοιούσιος, ‘of similar essence’) with the Father. Nicene orthodoxy also proclaims that there is only one God and that God exists in three *hupostases* (ὑποστάσεις; the singular form is ὑπόστασις / *hypóstasis*): Father, Son, and Spirit. *Hypostasis* was translated into Latin as *persona*, which led to the use of the trinitarian language of “God in three persons” in modern English, though this technical use of ‘person’ is (confusingly) not synonymous with the ordinary meaning of the word in English.

⁹ Cone, *God of the Opressed*, 13. Cone continues: “To be sure Athanasius’ assertion about the status of the Logos in the Godhead is important for the church’s continued christological investigations. But we must not forget that Athanasius’ question about the Son’s status in relation to the Father did not arise in the historical context of the slave codes and the slave drivers. And if he had been a black slave in America, I am sure he would have asked a different set of questions. He might have asked about the status of the Son in relation to slaveholders.” While contemporary answers to contemporary questions should not *supplant* Nicene christology, they can and should *supplement* and *enrich* Nicene theology.

¹⁰ Cone, *God of the Opressed*, 107.

represented a hellenization of Christianity has outlived its usefulness. . . . a more apt expression would be the Christianization of Hellenism . . . Christian thinking, while working within matters of thought and conceptions rooted in Greco-Roman culture, transformed them so profoundly that in the end something quite new came into being.¹¹

Similarly, Kenyan biblical scholar Andrew M. Mbuvi affirms the validity of the historical hellenization both on its own terms *and* as a model to be followed in other contexts.¹²

I admit that Nicene theological jargon is difficult to understand for those of us who don't speak Athanasius's Greek and Coptic or Augustine's and Tertullian's Latin, and also for those of us who may be fluent in a number of contemporary African languages and cultures but are not fluent in ancient African cultures. Indeed, in ordinary English "God in three Persons" unavoidably sounds like tritheism,¹³ the very thing that the Nicene Council (325) and Constantinopolitan Council (381) were so careful to guard against! (So I have full sympathy with my good friend, *nana*¹⁴ Jesse Mugambi.) Nonetheless, from Athanasius (c. 296 – 373) and Augustine (354–430) to Yared the Melodist (500s) of Aksum in the patristic era, to medieval Coptic and Nubian and Ethiopian Christian communities, to millions of contemporary Christians from Senegal to Eritrea and Morocco to Madagascar and Angola to Zimbabwe, the Creed is not mere western dogma but is also an *African* doxology which arises not from philosophical speculation but from lived experience of God in Christ.¹⁵ Moreover, the Nicene Creed was *not* created from the top down (and was certainly not written by the emperor) — the attendees represented a

¹¹ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, xvi–xvii.

¹² Andrew M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies*, 123.

¹³ Ironically, the Latin term *persona* (which is not synonymous with either of its English descendants 'persona' or 'person') was adopted in the West because Latin-speakers were concerned that the Greek term ὑπόστασις (*hupóstasis*, usually transliterated as 'hypostasis') had "a tritheistic connotation," the very thing the Greek-speakers were trying to avoid. See James Henry Owino Kombo, *Theological Models of the Doctrine of the Trinity: Trinity, Diversity and Theological Hermeneutics*, 43.

¹⁴ In dialects of Akan, spoken primarily in Ghana, "*nana* is a gender neutral honorific title for a living elder or an ancestor. A bearer of the title is considered to enshrine the communal moral ethos and as such to be a representative of the standard of the ancestors. The term is sometimes used as a personal name." Rudolf K. Gaisie, personal correspondence.

¹⁵ For both the Early Church, inside and outside of the Roman Empire, and contemporary African Christians, "the doctrine of the Trinity . . . emerges from the worship and the personal coming of God in the Son and the Holy Spirit," confirming "that the Trinity first and foremost is not an adjunct in theology and neither is it a mere doctrine of abstraction but to the contrary, it is a salvific reality experienced in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit." Kombo, *Theological Models of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, 120.

suffering people who had just emerged from a period of intense persecution at the hands of Empire — and the Creed arose as an ecumenical and global expression of a lived faith.

The Nicene Creed (325) and its revision, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), arose equally from the testimony of the Apostles, the witness of Scripture, and the Church's lived experience of God in Christ. From Thomas's addressing the resurrected Jesus as "my Lord and my God!" (John 20:28), the Church has struggled to reconcile two credal statements: the monotheism¹⁶ of "YHWH our Elohim, YHWH is one" (Deut 6:4) and the early apostolic claim that Jesus is identified with YHWH.¹⁷ Some scholars claim that such a "high christology" is necessarily late and non-original in the Christian movement. But a fair reading of the New Testament documents, the Apostolic Fathers, and outside sources such as Pliny the Younger make it clear Jesus was worshipped "as a god" (so Pliny) from the beginning. In recent scholarship, the work of Larry Hurtado (1943–2019) has definitively shown this to be the case.¹⁸

Trying to sensibly discuss this mystery — the monotheism of "YHWH our Elohim is one YHWH" and the early (and biblical) claim that Jesus is identified with YHWH — led to the orthodox doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation. The Nicene Creed of 325 was the attempt of the worldwide Church — African, Asian (as far east as India), and European — to articulate what the Church had always and everywhere believed while adopting technical language to guard against the Christological heresies of Arianism and adoptionism. But because the theological controversies of the day were primarily about the Christ, God the Son, the Nicene Creed said of the Spirit simply "we believe . . . and in the Holy Spirit." But additional clarification was eventually needed, and so the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 drew upon Scripture to expand the credal statement. Regarding the Spirit, it says "we believe . . . and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father,"¹⁹ who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets."

¹⁶ While in the time of Moses, Israel might have worshipped YHWH as a form of *henotheism* (i.e., many deities might be recognized but worship and allegiance are given only to one) rather than *monotheism*, by the first century Jews (whether or not they accepted Jesus as Messiah) and converts to Christianity were thoroughly monotheistic. This is why the Romans considered Christians to be "atheists": Christians denied the existence of any gods other than the one true God who was revealed in Jesus.

¹⁷ Here I hasten to observe that the seemingly contradictory is not necessarily mutual exclusive. Theologians can learn from physicists on this point. Is light a waveform of moving energy or a discrete material 'packet' (i.e., a *photon*)? The answer is "both."

¹⁸ See especially Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*.

¹⁹ Roman Catholics and most Protestants add the *filioque* [Latin: 'and the Son'] clause here, asserting that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father *and the Son*," but that was a much later

“Bible names for Bible things” is a popular slogan in the Christian tradition in which I was raised, but it ignores the nature of language and of culture. On such *solo scriptura* grounds,²⁰ many reject the technical language of Nicene orthodoxy. But *solo scriptura* is far more radical than the *sola scriptura* of the Protestant Reformers; while it may sound appealing, it is not tenable. If the *solo scriptura* principle is pushed, then we would be limited in our worship to the use of Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew. Ultimately, *solo scriptura* does disservice to the principle of translatability²¹ and fosters the very spirit of proselytization²² that we do well to reject when practiced by those engaged in Arabo-Euro-Asian domination of Africa and Africans. So I encourage all of us to endeavor to explore how the mystery of our faith can best be articulated in our own day and in our own vernaculars and contexts. As we do so, we should take care lest we discard what the first centuries of the African Christian Church believed and practiced simply because modern European slavers nominally confessed (albeit without meaningful praxis) some of the same things. *Ressourcement* is important: “the African church must recover its past, its history, and its traditions,” remembering that “the very essence of Christianity is trinitarian” and “every aspect of the Christian life and experience is and must be rooted in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”²³ Naturally, when we move into vernacular theologies — thinking in the contemporary languages of Africa or elsewhere instead of insisting on anglophone or francophone or lusophone theological forms — differences in our theological articulations can be

addition. A discussion of the *filioque* controversy is beyond our scope here. I exclude the term above to avoid anachronism.

²⁰ Most readers are familiar with the “five solas” (*quinque solae* in Latin) of the Protestant Reformation: *sola scriptura* (‘by Scripture alone’), *sola fide* (‘by faith alone’), *sola gratia* (‘by grace alone’), *solus Christus* (‘by Christ alone’), and *solus Deo gloria* (‘glory to God alone’). All five of these work together. But *solo scriptura* (which Latin readers will note is grammatically incorrect) refers to “scripture alone” in exclusion to Creeds, history, community accountability, etc. While *solo scriptura* claims to find authority in Scripture alone, in practice it finds authority in *individual interpretation* of Scripture alone, precisely because it rejects the guidance of Church, precedence, history, and even of the Holy Spirit.

²¹ See Kwame Bediako, “Biblical Exegesis in Africa: The Significance of the Translated Scripture,” Lamin Sanneh, “Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scripture Translation,” Sanneh, “The Significance of the Translation Principle,” Retief Müller, “The (non-)translatability of the Holy Trinity,” 1–2; and Andrew F. Walls, “The Translation Principle in Christian History.”

²² On the crucial distinction between *conversion* and *proselytization*, see my “Conversion or Proselytization? Being Maasai, Becoming Christian;” and also the essential work of Andrew F. Walls, including especially his “Conversion and Christian Continuity” and “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church.” For a summary discussion in French on Walls’s views on conversion, see Hannes Wiher, “Le prosélytisme: Une évaluation évangélique [‘Proselytism: An Evangelical Evaluation’],” 124–127.

²³ Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, “The Trinity in Africa: Trends and Trajectories,” 66, 65.

accentuated, much as patristic and medieval Syriac and Gə‘əz (or Ge‘ez) theological formulations sound rather different from the latinate theological formulations of Western Christianity to which most of us are more accustomed.

This issue begins with an editorial essay from Chammah Kaunda, one of our managing editors. Looking toward an indigenous African (re)discovery of the Nicene Creed, he takes “a Decolonialpentecostal Back-gaze” at the Nicene era in “The Echo of Nicene Faith.” Such engagement with Nicene articulations of faith do not lead to a Hellenistic intellectual colonizing of the mind of Africans but rather can serve precisely to help *decolonize* “the mind of African Christians.” Proceeding to the article section of this issue, “Out of Africa, For the World: The Nicene Creed of 325” by patristics scholar Sara Parvis, explores the debt that Nicene orthodoxy owes to the ancient African church. Our second article, Calum Samuelson’s “*Täwəḥədo* Theologising as a Guide for Ecumenical Fellowship,” requires some additional introduction, as it uses Gə‘əz terminology with which many of our readers will be unfamiliar.²⁴

Täwəḥədo is a technical Gə‘əz term, used also in modern Ethiopian languages such as Amharic and Tigrinya, that refers to the christology of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches, stating that Christ has a single, unified nature. Its use originated in the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which attempted to further clarify Nicene understandings. *Täwəḥədo* christology is closely related to the miaphysite christology²⁵ of Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376 – 444) and the Coptic Orthodox Church. Both *täwəḥədo* and *miaphysite* christologies are thoroughly orthodox as regarding the Nicene Creed of 325 and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, and both fully subscribe to the *intention* of the Chalcedonian Definition’s attempt to emphasize that Christ is fully God and fully human, but they reject the *dyophysite* (‘two natures’) formulation of the Chalcedonian Definition on the grounds that it sounded (to the non-Chalcedonians) as though it claims that are two Christs rather than one. The division between the so-called Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians largely came about through misunderstanding, as the technical Greek terms being debated had different meanings, rather than single

²⁴ Ge‘ez (ግዕዝ), sometimes referred to as “Old Ethiopic,” is an ancient Afro-Asiatic South Semitic language once spoken in what is now Eritrea and Ethiopia. It became an ancient Christian language alongside Greek, Syriac, and Latin.

²⁵ *Miaphysite*, derived from μία φύσις (*mía phýsis*, ‘one nature’) is the description of most non-Chalcedonian christology. It refers to Christ having a single united nature that is both fully divine and fully human. Many textbooks from the Western tradition (Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox) erroneously refer to the Cyrillian christology of the Oriental Orthodox churches as *monophysite*. Monophysite christology, however, implies a decreased importance and subordination of Christ’s humanity. As a technical term, *monophysite theology* would be an apt description of the theology of ‘Oneness’ Pentecostalism. *Monophysite* is not a fair characterization of Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox christology; its use represents an uncritical repetition of ancient slanders.

shared meanings, in different regional dialects of Greek. Of course, regional rivalries and personal rivalries also played a role. Given its aftermath, it is for good reason that patristics scholar and missions historian Andrew F. Walls has characterized the Council of Chalcedon as “the great ecumenical failure of the fifth century.”²⁶ I concur with this evaluation, and I suggest that we do well to recognize its challenges.

It is worth pointing out that since at least 1964, the Chalcedonian Eastern Orthodox Churches and the non-Chalcedonian Oriental Orthodox Churches have agreed that both the Chalcedonian and the Cyrillian christological formulations are fully orthodox, and that both sides agree that Christ is *fully God and fully human*. Similarly, since 1973, the Roman Catholic Church and Coptic Orthodox Church came to the same agreement. In a Common Declaration issued in 1984 by the pope of the Roman Catholic Church and the patriarch of the miaphysite Syrian Orthodox Church stated that

The confusions and schisms that occurred between their Churches in the later centuries, they realize today, in no way affect or touch the substance of their faith, since these arose only because of differences in terminology and culture and in the various formulae adopted by different theological schools to express the same matter. Accordingly, we find today no real basis for the sad divisions and schisms that subsequently arose between us concerning the doctrine of Incarnation. In words and life we confess the true doctrine concerning Christ our Lord, notwithstanding the differences in interpretation of such a doctrine which arose at the time of the Council of Chalcedon.²⁷

Although technical terminology can be confusing and divisive, and its translation challenging, it is important to remember that our “belief in the triune God is not just an abstract theological postulation by sophisticated theologians, but has serious meaning and implications for Christian spirituality and practice.”²⁸ But as the universal Church has recognized that God has revealed

²⁶ See Andrew F. Walls, “The Break-up of Early World Christianity and the Great Ecumenical Failure.”

²⁷ “Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and The Ecumenical Patriarch of Antioch His Holiness Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas.”

²⁸ Kunhiyop, “The Trinity in Africa,” 55–56. Thus Jean-Paul Sagadou asks a crucial theological question: “How do humans, in whom the image of the Holy Trinity is imprinted, share in trinitarian life? Conversely, How does the Trinity penetrate human life in a new and complete way?” Sagadou, *À la recherche des traces africaines du Dieu-Trinité: Une approche narrative du mystère trinitaire*, 61; my translation. Sagadou’s French reads “Comment l’homme, dans lequel est imprimé l’image de la Sainte Trinité, partage-t-il la vie trinitaire ? Et inversement, comment la Trinité pénètre-t-elle de manière nouvelle et entière dans la vie de l’homme ?”

Godself as Trinity, perhaps rather than focusing on debates about translating Nicene theology we should turn to doxology and praise.²⁹

The remaining articles belong to the eclectic section of this issue. Emmanuel Oumarou of Cameroon explores a “Sunomilean Theology as a Model of Inter-Contextual Biblical Theology: Conceptual and Methodological Foundations for Theologizing with Others,” coining a new term from the verb συνομιλέω (*sunomiléō*, ‘to converse with’). Oumarou’s sunomilean theological “discourse thus emphasizes mutuality, reciprocity, and correlation in communication.” Rahila L. Jakawa of Nigeria offers “Partners, Not Rivals: Gender Inequality and Its Implications for Women’s Participation in Pastoral Ministry in Church of Christ.” Finally, Rachel Fiedler, Rhodian Munyenembe, and Atipatsa Chiwanda Kaminga, all of Malawi, offer a study on the “Prevention and Care during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Masculinities as a Double-Edged Sword for Men and Women in Church Leadership in some Malawian Urban Churches.”

Seven books are evaluated with full-length review essays. First Kayle Pelletier offers a review of Samuel Waje Kunhiyop’s *African Christian Theology*, a systematic theology for Africa.³⁰ The next four book reviews concern African Christian contextual realities. Nathan Scott evaluates Adam Simmons’s *Nubia, Ethiopia, and the Crusading World, 1095–1402*. Nebeyou Alemu Terefe focuses on Ethiopian traditions that extend at least as far back as the medieval period but which continue to the present in his evaluation of Alexandra Sellassie Antohin’s *The Covenant’s Veil: Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition of Elaboration*. Moving a little south and to strictly contemporary times, Kevin Muriithi Ndereba reviews Kyama Mugambi’s *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*. From southern Africa, Daniel Andrew examines Peter White’s edited volume, *Faith, Spirituality and Praxis: Exploring Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches*. Our final two book review essays return to the beginning: the evaluation of Scripture. Bitrus S. Sarma evaluates Tekalign Duguma Negewo’s *Creating Community Identity in Matthew’s Gospel Narrative* while Dion A. Forster explores *Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives*, edited by Sofanit T. Abebe, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Abeneazer G. Urga.

Finally, we have four ‘Book Note’ short reviews, introducing *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* by Verena Krebs, *Christianity in Malawi: A Reader*, edited by Klaus Fiedler and Kenneth R. Ross, *Who Are My People? Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*,

²⁹ This is also the conclusion of Müller, “The (non)translatability of the Trinity,” 8: “Worshipping the Trinity would be the more appropriate course of action.”

³⁰ Kunhiyop discusses trinitarian Nicene theology in *African Christian Theology*, 4, 7, and 45–49.

and *Shame in the Individual Lament Psalms and African Spirituality* by Mark S. Aidoo.

This issue offers voices representing nine countries in Africa —Cameroon, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia (this includes authors of reviewed books). If your country is not represented, then we encourage you to consider submitting something for a future issue. But for now — *tolle lege*, ‘take and read.’

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³² This chapter is a reprint of an article of the same title published in *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1, no. 1 (1998): 2–16.

³³ This article was republished as "The Translation Principle in Christian History," chapter 3 in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 26–42 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996).



ÉDITORIAL

Nicée à 1700 ans

Racines et Branches dans le Christianisme Africain

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“*Nous croyons . . .*”
— Le Credo de Nicée¹

Ce numéro de *Théologie Chrétienne Africaine* est un numéro thématique célébrant le dix-septième centenaire du Credo de Nicée. Pour la majorité des chrétiens dans le monde, le Credo de Nicée de 325 et le Credo de Nicée-Constantinople de 381 restent normatifs.² Mais nombreux sont ceux qui rejettent les articulations nicéennes de la foi chrétienne comme une hellénisation corrompue du christianisme. Les appels à la *deshellénisation* du christianisme sont aussi fréquents que les appels à la décolonisation.³ En juin 2025, un membre de la Communauté Théologique Africaine (*African Theological Fellowship* ou ATF en anglais), a fait référence dans le groupe WhatsApp de l’ATF à « la christologie ontologique transmise aux Africains par

¹ Alors que le Credo des Apôtres ultérieur commence par le singulier grammatical « Je crois » (*credo* en latin ; c’est de ce terme que dérive le mot français « credo »), les Credos Nicéen et Nicéen-Constantinopolitain antérieurs commencent tous deux par le pluriel « Nous croyons » (Πιστεύομεν / *Pisteúomen*). Si la forme singulière découle sans aucun doute de l’importance pour chaque individu de posséder sa propre confession de foi baptismale, nous pensons que la forme plurielle permet de mettre en avant la nature communautaire de la foi chrétienne. Bien que nous exerçons la πίστις (*pistis*, « foi, croyance, allégeance ») en tant qu’individus, nous ne suivons pas le chemin de la foi seuls, mais en communauté avec d’autres croyants.

² Le Credo de Nicée a été formulé lors du Concile de Nicée en 325. Une révision clarifiée du Credo de Nicée a été formulée par le Concile de Constantinople en 381.

³ Voir la discussion sur ce point dans Ernst M. CONRADIE et Teddy C. SAKUPAPA, « ‘Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity’ or ‘The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity’ ? » [anglais: « ‘Décoloniser la doctrine de la Trinité’ ou ‘La doctrine décolonisatrice de la Trinité’ ? »], p. 367–370 et p. 375.

leurs maîtres esclavagistes coloniaux européens, imprégnée de philosophie et de culture européennes . . . » (ma traduction). À bien trop d'égards, à l'époque moderne, les Européens et les Euro-Américains n'avaient pas conscience que leur expression de la foi chrétienne était intrinsèquement contextuelle, « imprégnée de la philosophie et de la culture européennes », comme l'a si bien dit mon collègue. Souvent, ils confondaient leur culture et leur langue avec le christianisme. Ce n'est pas rare que cela continue d'être le cas. Il est absolument nécessaire de reconnaître que *toute* théologie est contextuelle et dépendante de la culture.

Cette reconnaissance suppose une réponse à la question, *La culture a-t-elle de l'importance ?*, qui peut être formulée plus précisément ainsi : *La culture joue-t-elle un rôle important dans nos formulations théologiques ?* Pour ma part, je suis convaincu que la culture a de l'importance, mais la question reste de savoir *comment* elle en a. Quel est le rôle approprié, y compris les limites de ce rôle, de la culture — y compris les philosophies inhérentes à nos visions du monde, tant explicites qu'implicites — dans notre théologisation ? Différentes cultures posent différentes questions. Les réponses données par de brillants théologiens il y a mille ans, ou cinq cents ans, en Angleterre, en France ou en Allemagne, peuvent ne pas être pertinentes dans nos contextes africains, simplement parce qu'ici, en Afrique, nous posons des questions différentes auxquelles la théologie chrétienne occidentale traditionnelle n'a peut-être pas de réponses. Permettez-moi de reformuler ma question : *Lorsque nous théologisons, la culture a-t-elle une importance ? Si la culture a son importance, quel est son rôle et sa fonction appropriés ?* Plus précisément, dans le contexte des réalités africaines, quel est le rôle et la fonction appropriés de la culture africaine dans notre théologie (chrétienne), c'est-à-dire dans la manière dont nous exprimons la vérité de l'Évangile et ses implications pour notre mode de vie ?

En ce qui concerne plus particulièrement les questions christologiques qui ont présidé aux délibérations du Concile de Nicée en 325, la déclaration de mon collègue de l'ATF semble ignorer le fait que la christologie trinitaire s'est d'abord exprimée avec force en *Afrique* et en *Asie* plutôt qu'en Europe — dans la mesure où notre christologie ontologique est une théologie contextuelle, elle représente une immersion dans les philosophies et les cultures *africaines* et *asiatiques* autant, voire plus, que dans celles européennes. La christologie nicéenne (et nicéenne-constantinopolitaine) a des racines profondes en Afrique. Lorsque le théologien africain Tertullien a inventé le terme *trinitas*, en latin, il essayait de donner un sens au credo israélite/juif, le Shema — « Écoute, Israël, YHWH notre Dieu, YHWH est un » (Deut 6, 4) — ainsi qu'à l'expérience de l'Église du Jésus Ressuscité. Il ne créait pas une nouvelle doctrine, mais exprimait simplement de manière plus concise ce que l'Église croyait, confessait et expérimentait depuis longtemps. Il est important de rappeler que le latin était

une langue chrétienne vernaculaire *africaine* pendant de nombreuses générations avant de devenir une langue chrétienne à Rome ou ailleurs en Europe.⁴

Prenons l'exemple du géant de la « christologie ontologique » : il s'agit d'Athanase, un Africain (et non un colon grec). Si Athanase était certes cosmopolite, il était tout aussi à l'aise dans la ville multiculturelle d'Alexandrie que dans les villages africains de la vallée du Nil. Sa christologie n'était pas différente de celle d'Antoine le Grand, le saint homme africain qui n'avait jamais appris le grec, mais ne parlait que la langue vernaculaire africaine de ses ancêtres. La théologie trinitaire systématique la plus connue qui nous soit parvenue de l'époque patristique est peut-être celle d'Augustin (354–430),⁵ un homme qui se désignait lui-même et ses confrères évêques de la région comme « nous, les Africains ».⁶ Beaucoup pointent du doigt « Constantin ! » et supposent que le Concile de Nicée et le Credo de Nicée n'étaient rien d'autre qu'un outil de l'Empire. Cette interprétation erronée ignore toutefois les réalités historiques. Bien que beaucoup pensent que le Concile de Nicée « s'est déroulé dans le contexte social où l'Église était la religion privilégiée de l'État Romain »,⁷ cela est erroné. Le Concile de Nicée s'est tenu en 325, douze ans après que l'édit de Milan (313) ait retiré le christianisme de la liste des religions illégales, et les évêques chrétiens bénéficiaient certes d'une certaine faveur de la part de l'empereur, mais à ce stade, ils n'étaient pas encore plus favorisés que les prêtres des religions traditionnelles. Arius, lui-même berbère africain, a été ordonné presbytre la même année que l'édit de Milan. Mais la controverse a éclaté lorsque Arius a estimé que l'évêque d'Alexandrie flirtait avec l'ancienne hérésie du sabellianisme/monarchianisme. La Controverse Arienne est née d'un débat entre des réponses africaines rivales à des questions qui concernaient les chrétiens africains.

De plus, le Concile de Nicée était véritablement œcuménique, avec des délégués venus de l'extérieur de l'Empire Romain — d'Arménie, de Géorgie, de

⁴ Voir Andrew F. WALLS, « Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect [anglais : 'L'Afrique dans l'histoire chrétienne : rétrospective et perspectives'] », p. 87.

⁵ Le *De Trinitate* d'Augustin mérite sa renommée. Mais le christianisme était polycentrique à ses origines, et reconnaître son polycentrisme ainsi que sa nature multiculturelle et multilingue est la correction nécessaire à un eurocentrisme erroné. Ne commettons pas l'erreur similaire d'insister sur l'afrocentrisme. Il convient donc de mentionner que le *De Trinitate* écrit par Hilaire de Poitiers (vers 310 – vers 357) est sans doute supérieur à celui d'Augustin, même si ce dernier a eu beaucoup plus d'influence dans le christianisme occidental, car Hilaire s'est inspiré plus profondément de la théologie grecque du nord-est de l'Afrique et de l'Asie occidentale. Comme Athanase, Hilaire a été exilé par l'autorité impériale pour son engagement indéfectible envers l'orthodoxie nicéenne.

⁶ Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustin* ['Lettres de saint Augustin'] 138.4.19 (NPNF1 1:697).

⁷ Comme le dit James H. CONE, *God of the Oppressed* ['Dieu des opprimés'], p. 107 ; ma traduction.

l'Empire Perse sassanide et d'Inde. En Perse, adhérer à l'orthodoxie nicéenne était sans doute un acte politiquement subversif, qui sapait l'empire. Pendant une longue période, cela a également été le cas dans l'Empire Romain lui-même. La victoire de l'orthodoxie nicéenne n'était pas certaine. Lorsque les empereurs romains, avec toute leur puissance, tentaient de convertir l'ensemble du monde chrétien à la christologie arienne ou semi-arienne, l'Africain Athanase fut envoyé en exil à plusieurs reprises plutôt que de renoncer à sa christologie africaine. C'est pourquoi la tradition chrétienne occidentale en est venue à parler d'*Athanasius contra mundum* (latin : « Athanase contre le monde »). Les fréquents exils de divers champions de l'orthodoxie nicéenne par les autorités impériales prouvent à suffisance que le christianisme orthodoxe (nicéen) n'était certainement pas « la religion privilégiée de l'État romain » à cette époque. Lorsque l'empereur romain Constance II (r. 317–361), fils de Constantin le Grand, écrivit à Ezana, le roi chrétien d'Aksoum (Éthiopie), pour le presser de rejeter Athanase et d'accepter l'évêque arien nommé par l'empereur, Ezana refusa (avec le soutien des dirigeants de l'Église d'Aksoum).

Je reconnais que certaines plaintes contemporaines concernant le jargon trinitaire nicéen sont justifiées — pare exemple, le théologien kenyan Jesse Mugambi note que l'utilistion du terme « personnes » (et vraisemblablement aussi des termes l'*homoousios* et l'*homoiousios* !) est tellement étrangère aux contextes africains qu'il en devient tout simplement inutile,⁸ et le théologien afro-américain James Cone observe qu'aujourd'hui

la question de l'*homoousia* n'est pas une question noire. Les Noirs ne se demandent pas si Jésus est un avec le Père ou s'il est divin et humain, bien que les formulations orthodoxes soient implicites dans leur langage. Ils se demandent si Jésus marche avec eux, s'ils peuvent l'appeler sur le « téléphone de la prière » et lui raconter tous leurs problèmes.⁹

⁸ Jesse N. K. MUGAMBI, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* [‘Théologie Chrétienne Africaine : Une Introduction’], p. 7. L'orthodoxie nicéenne de langue grecque reconnaît que Dieu le Fils est *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος, « de même essence ou être ») avec Dieu le Père. L'hérésie arienne proclamait que le Christ n'était que *homoiousios* (ὁμοιούσιος, « d'essence similaire ») avec le Père. L'orthodoxie nicéenne proclame également qu'il n'y a qu'un seul Dieu et que Dieu existe en trois *hypostases* (ὑποστάσεις; la forme singulière est ὑπόστασις / *hypóstasis*) : le Père, le Fils et l'Esprit. *Hypostasis* a été traduit en latin par *persona*, ce qui a conduit à l'utilisation du langage trinitaire « Dieu en trois personnes » en français moderne, bien que cette utilisation technique du mot « personne » ne soit (de manière confuse) pas synonyme du sens ordinaire du mot en français.

⁹ CONE, *God of the Oppressed* [‘Dieu des opprimés’], p. 13. Cone poursuit : « Il est certain que l'affirmation d'Athanase sur le statut du Logos dans la divinité est importante pour la poursuite des recherches christologiques de l'Église. Mais nous ne devons pas oublier que la question d'Athanase sur le statut du Fils par rapport au Père ne s'est pas posée dans le contexte historique des codes esclavagistes et des esclavagistes. Et s'il avait été un esclave

Mais lorsque Cone affirme que « qui est le Christ », tel que défini par la christologie nicéenne, « était contrôlé par la vision grecque de ce que Dieu devait faire pour sauver l'humanité », ¹⁰ il occulte malheureusement l'*africanité* d'Athanase, ses racines profondes dans la langue et la culture égyptiennes/copte — c'est-à-dire *africaines* — et la manière dont les Pères africains de l'Église primitive, tels qu'Athanase et Augustin, répondaient en fait aux questions *africaines*.

Bien que je soutienne les appels à la décolonisation (et à la déprosélytisation), y compris de la théologie chrétienne, ainsi que les appels à prendre en compte les contextes contemporains dans notre réflexion théologique, l'historien Robert Louis Wilken revisite la valeur de cette ancienne théologie contextuelle :

L'idée selon laquelle le développement de la pensée chrétienne primitive représentait une hellénisation du christianisme a dépassé son utilité. . . . une expression plus appropriée serait la christianisation de l'hellénisme . . . La pensée chrétienne, tout en travaillant sur des sujets de pensée et des conceptions enracinés dans la culture gréco-romaine, les a transformés si profondément qu'en fin de compte quelque chose de tout à fait nouveau a été créé.¹¹

De façon similaire, le bibliste kenyan Andrew M. Mbuvi confirme la validité de l'hellénisation historique à la fois en tant que telle et *aussi* en tant que modèle à suivre dans d'autres contextes.¹²

J'admets que le jargon théologique nicéen est difficile à comprendre pour ceux d'entre nous qui ne parlent pas le grec et le copte d'Athanase ou le latin d'Augustin et de Tertullien, ainsi que pour ceux d'entre nous qui maîtrisent peut-être plusieurs langues et cultures africaines contemporaines, mais qui ne connaissent pas bien les cultures africaines anciennes. En effet, en français courant, « Dieu en trois personnes » sonne inévitablement comme du trithéisme,¹³ ce contre quoi le Concile de Nicée (325) et le Concile de

noir en Amérique, je suis sûr qu'il aurait posé des questions différentes. Il aurait peut-être interrogé le statut du Fils par rapport aux propriétaires d'esclaves » ; mes traductions. Si les réponses contemporaines aux questions contemporaines ne doivent pas *supplanter* la christologie nicéenne, elles peuvent et doivent *compléter* et *enrichir* la théologie nicéenne.

¹⁰ CONE, *God of the Oppressed* ['Dieu des opprimés'], p. 107 ; ma traduction.

¹¹ Robert Louis WILKEN, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought : Seeking the Face of God* ['L'esprit de la pensée chrétienne primitive : À la recherche du visage de Dieu'], p. xvi-xvii.

¹² Andrew M. MBUVI, *African Biblical Studies : Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* ['Études Bibliques Africaines : Démasquer le racisme et le colonialisme inhérents aux études bibliques'], p. 123.

¹³ Ironiquement, le terme latin *persona* (qui n'est synonyme de ses descendants français « persona » ou « personne ») a été adopté en Occident parce que les locuteurs latins craignaient que le terme grec ὑπόστασις (*hupóstasis*, généralement translittéré par

Constantinople (381) ont pris tant de précautions ! (Je comprends donc tout à fait mon bon ami, *nana*¹⁴ Jesse Mugambi.) Néanmoins, depuis Athanase (vers 296–373) et Augustin (354–430) jusqu'à Yared le Mélodiste (les années 500) d'Aksoum à l'époque patristique, en passant par les communautés chrétiennes médiévales coptes, nubiennes et éthiopiennes, jusqu'aux millions de chrétiens contemporains du Sénégal à l'Érythrée, du Maroc à Madagascar et de l'Angola au Zimbabwe, le Credo n'est pas un simple dogme occidental, mais aussi une doxologie *africaine* qui découle non pas de la spéculation philosophique, mais de l'expérience vécue de Dieu dans le Christ.¹⁵ En outre, le Credo de Nicée n'a pas été créé du haut vers le bas (et n'a certainement pas été rédigé par l'empereur) — les participants représentaient un peuple souffrant qui venait de sortir d'une période de persécution intense de la part de l'Empire — et le Credo est apparu comme l'expression œcuménique et mondiale d'une foi vécue.

Le Credo de Nicée (325) et sa révision, le Credo de Nicée-Constantinople (381), sont issus à parts égales du témoignage des apôtres, du témoignage des Écritures, et de l'expérience vécue par l'Église de Dieu en Christ. Depuis que Thomas s'est adressé à Jésus ressuscité en disant « mon Seigneur et mon Dieu ! » (Jn 20, 28), l'Église a eu du mal à concilier deux déclarations de foi : le monothéisme¹⁶ de « YHWH notre Élohim, YHWH est un » (Dt 6, 4 ; ma traduction de l'hébreu) et l'affirmation apostolique primitive selon laquelle Jésus

« hypostase ») ait « une connotation trithéiste », ce que les locuteurs grecs cherchaient justement à éviter. Voir James Henry Owino KOMBO, *Theological Models of the Doctrine of the Trinity: Trinity, Diversity and Theological Hermeneutics* [Modèles Théologiques de la Doctrine de la Trinité : Trinité, Diversité et Herméneutiques Théologiques], p. 43.

¹⁴ Dans les dialectes akan, principalement parlés au Ghana, « *nana* est un titre honorifique neutre désignant une personne âgée vivante ou un ancêtre. Le porteur de ce titre est considéré comme incarnant les valeurs morales de la communauté et, à ce titre, comme représentant les principes des ancêtres. Ce terme est parfois utilisé comme prénom ». Rudolf K. GAISIE, correspondance personnelle ; ma traduction.

¹⁵ Pour l'Église primitive, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur de l'Empire romain, comme aussi pour les chrétiens africains contemporains, « la doctrine de la Trinité [...] découle du culte et de la venue personnelle de Dieu dans le Fils et le Saint-Esprit », confirmant « que la Trinité n'est avant tout ni un ajout à la théologie, ni une simple doctrine abstraite, mais au contraire une réalité salvifique vécue en Jésus-Christ et dans le Saint-Esprit ». KOMBO, *Theological Models of the Doctrine of the Trinity* ['Modèles théologiques de la doctrine de la Trinité'], p. 120 ; ma traduction.

¹⁶ Alors qu'à l'époque de Moïse, Israël vénérât peut-être YHWH sous la forme d'un *hénonthéisme* (c'est-à-dire que plusieurs divinités pouvaient être reconnues, mais que le culte et l'allégeance n'étaient accordés qu'à une seule) plutôt que d'un *monothéisme*, au premier siècle, les Juifs (qu'ils aient accepté ou non Jésus comme Messie) et les convertis au christianisme étaient profondément monothéistes. C'est pourquoi les Romains considéraient les chrétiens comme des « athées » : les chrétiens niaient l'existence de tout autre dieu que le seul vrai Dieu révélé en Jésus.

est identifié à YHWH.¹⁷ Certains érudits affirment qu'une telle « christologie élevée » est nécessairement tardive et non originale dans le mouvement chrétien. Mais une lecture impartiale des documents du Nouveau Testament, des Pères apostoliques et de sources extérieures telles que Plinie le Jeune montre clairement que Jésus était vénéré « comme un dieu » (selon Plinie) dès le début. Dans les études récentes, les travaux de Larry Hurtado (1943–2019) ont définitivement démontré que tel était le cas.¹⁸

Tenter de discuter raisonnablement de ce mystère — le monothéisme de « YHWH notre Elohim est un seul YHWH » et l'affirmation ancienne (et biblique) selon laquelle Jésus est identifié à YHWH — a conduit aux doctrines orthodoxes de la Trinité et de l'Incarnation. Le Credo de Nicée de 325 était une tentative de l'Église mondiale — africaine, asiatique (jusqu'en Inde), et européenne — d'articuler ce que l'Église avait toujours et partout cru, tout en adoptant un langage technique pour se prémunir contre les hérésies christologiques de l'arianisme et de l'adoptionnisme. Mais comme les controverses théologiques de l'époque portaient principalement sur le Christ, Dieu le Fils, le Credo de Nicée disait simplement à propos de l'Esprit : « nous croyons [...] et au Saint-Esprit ». Cependant, des éclaircissements supplémentaires ont finalement été nécessaires, et le Credo de Nicée-Constantinople de 381 s'est appuyé sur les Écritures pour développer la déclaration de foi. Concernant l'Esprit, il dit : « nous croyons [...] et au Saint-Esprit, Seigneur et source de vie, qui procède du Père,¹⁹ qui avec le Père et le Fils est adoré et glorifié, qui a parlé par les prophètes ».

« Des noms bibliques pour des choses bibliques » (ou « *Bible names for Bible things* » en anglais) est un slogan populaire dans la tradition chrétienne dans laquelle j'ai été élevé, mais il ignore la nature du langage et de la culture. Sur la base de ce principe de *solo scriptura*,²⁰ beaucoup rejettent le langage technique

¹⁷ Je m'empresse ici de faire remarquer que ce qui semble contradictoire ne s'exclut pas nécessairement mutuellement. Les théologiens peuvent apprendre des physiciens sur ce point. La lumière est-elle une forme d'énergie en mouvement ou un « paquet » matériel discret (c'est-à-dire un *photon*) ? La réponse est « les deux ».

¹⁸ Voir notamment Larry W. HURTADO, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* [Le Seigneur Jésus-Christ : La dévotion à Jésus dans le christianisme primitif].

¹⁹ Les catholiques romains et la plupart des protestants ajoutent ici la clause *filioque* [latin : « et le Fils »], affirmant que l'Esprit « procède du Père et du Fils », mais il s'agit là d'un ajout beaucoup plus tardif. Une discussion sur la controverse *filioque* dépasse le cadre de notre propos ici. J'exclus le terme ci-dessus pour éviter tout anachronisme.

²⁰ La plupart des lecteurs connaissent les « cinq solas » (*quinque solae* en latin) de la Réforme protestante : *sola scriptura* (« par les Écritures seules »), *sola fide* (« par la foi seule »), *sola gratia* (« par la grâce seule »), *solus Christus* (« par le Christ seul ») et *solus Deo gloria* (« gloire à Dieu seul »). Ces cinq principes fonctionnent ensemble. Mais *solo scriptura* (que les lecteurs latins remarqueront être grammaticalement incorrect) fait référence à « l'Écriture

de l'orthodoxie nicéenne. Mais le *solo scriptura* est beaucoup plus radical que le *sola scriptura* des réformateurs protestants ; bien qu'il puisse sembler attrayant, il n'est pas tenable. Si le principe de *solo scriptura* était appliqué de manière cohérente, notre culte serait limité à l'utilisation du grec, de l'araméen et de l'hébreu. En fin de compte, le *solo scriptura* nuit au principe de traduisibilité²¹ et encourage l'esprit même du prosélytisme²² que nous avons raison de rejeter lorsqu'il est pratiqué par ceux qui participent à la domination arabo-euro-asiatique de l'Afrique et des Africains. J'encourage donc chacun d'entre nous à s'efforcer d'explorer comment le mystère de notre foi peut être le mieux articulé à notre époque, dans nos propres langues vernaculaires et contextes. Ce faisant, nous devons veiller à ne pas rejeter ce que les premiers siècles de l'Église chrétienne africaine croyaient et pratiquaient simplement parce que les esclavagistes européens modernes confessaient nominalement (mais sans pratique significative) certaines des mêmes choses. Le ressourcement est important : « l'Église africaine doit retrouver son passé, son histoire et ses traditions », en se rappelant que « l'essence même du christianisme est trinitaire » et que « chaque aspect de la vie et de l'expérience chrétiennes est et doit être enraciné dans le Père, le Fils et le Saint-Esprit ». ²³ Naturellement, lorsque nous passons à des théologies vernaculaires — en pensant dans les langues contemporaines de l'Afrique ou d'ailleurs au lieu d'insister sur les formes théologiques anglophones, francophones ou lusophones — les différences dans nos articulations théologiques peuvent être accentuées, tout comme les formulations théologiques patristiques et médiévales syriaques et

seule », à l'exclusion des credos, de l'histoire, de la responsabilité communautaire, etc. Alors que *solo scriptura* prétend trouver son autorité dans l'Écriture seule, dans la pratique, elle trouve son autorité dans l'interprétation individuelle de l'Écriture seule, précisément parce qu'elle rejette les conseils de l'Église, les précédents, l'histoire et même le Saint-Esprit.

²¹ Voir Kwame BEDIAKO, « Biblical Exegesis in Africa: The Significance of the Translated Scripture [Exégèse biblique en Afrique : l'importance des Écritures traduites] » ; Lamin SANNEH, « Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scripture Translation [Évangile et culture : les ramifications de la traduction des Écritures] » ; SANNEH, « The Significance of the Translation Principle [La signification du principe de traduction] » ; Retief MÜLLER, «The (non-)translatability of the Holy Trinity [La (non-)traductibilité de la Sainte Trinité] », p. 1-2; et Andrew F. WALLS, «The Translation Principle in Christian History [Le principe de traduction dans l'histoire chrétienne] ».

²² Sur la distinction cruciale entre *conversion* et *prosélytisme*, voir mon article, see my « Conversion or Proselytization? Being Maasai, Becoming Christian [Conversion ou prosélytisme ? Être Massaï, devenir chrétien] » ; voir également les travaux essentiels d'Andrew F. WALLS, notamment « Conversion and Christian Continuity [Conversion et continuité chrétienne] » et « Converts or Proselytes ? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church [Convertis ou prosélytes ? La crise de la conversion dans l'Église primitive] ». Pour un résumé en français des opinions de Walls sur la conversion, voir Hannes WIHER, « Le prosélytisme : Une évaluation évangélique », p. 124-127.

²³ Samuel Waje KUNHIYOP, « The Trinity in Africa : Trends and Trajectories [La Trinité en Afrique : tendances et trajectoires] », p. 66, 65 ; ma traduction.

gə'əz (ou gə'ez) semblent assez différentes des formulations théologiques latines du christianisme occidental auxquelles la plupart d'entre nous sommes plus habitués.

Ce numéro s'ouvre sur un essai éditorial de Chammah Kaunda, l'un de nos directeurs-éditeurs. Dans la perspective d'une (re)découverte africaine indigène du Credo de Nicée, il jette un « regard décolonial pentecôtiste rétrospectif » sur l'ère nicéenne dans « The Echo of Nicene Faith [L'écho de la foi nicéenne]' ». Une telle approche des articulations nicéennes de la foi ne conduit pas à une colonisation intellectuelle hellénistique de l'esprit des Africains, mais peut au contraire contribuer précisément à décoloniser « l'esprit des chrétiens africains ». Passons maintenant à la section articles de ce numéro, « Out of Africa, For the World: The Nicene Creed of 325 [Sortir d'Afrique, pour le monde : le Credo de Nicée de 325]' » de Sara Parvis, spécialiste en patristique, explore la dette que l'orthodoxie nicéenne a envers l'ancienne Église africaine. Notre deuxième article, « *Tāwahaḍo* Theologising as a Guide for Ecumenical Fellowship [La théologie *Tāwahaḍo* comme guide pour la communion œcuménique]' » de Calum Samuelson, nécessite quelques explications supplémentaires, car il utilise la terminologie gə'ez, peu familière à la plupart de nos lecteurs.²⁴

Tāwahaḍo est un terme technique gə'ez, également utilisé dans les langues éthiopiennes modernes telles que l'amharique et le tigrigna, qui fait référence à la christologie des Églises Orthodoxes Éthiopienne et Érythréenne, affirmant que le Christ a une nature unique et unifiée. Son utilisation remonte à la suite du Concile de Chalcédoine en 451, qui tentait de clarifier davantage les conceptions nicéennes. La christologie *tāwahaḍo* est étroitement liée à la christologie miaphysite²⁵ de Cyrille d'Alexandrie et à l'Église Copte Orthodoxe.

²⁴ Gə'ez (ግዕዝ), parfois appelé « vieil éthiopien », est une ancienne langue afro-asiatique sémitique du sud qui était autrefois parlée dans ce qui est aujourd'hui l'Érythrée et l'Éthiopie. Il est devenu une ancienne langue chrétienne au même titre que le grec, le syriaque et le latin.

²⁵ Le terme *miaphysite*, dérivé de μία φύσις (*mía phýsis*, « une nature »), décrit la plupart des christologies non chalcédoniennes. Il fait référence au Christ ayant une nature unique et unifiée, à la fois pleinement divine et pleinement humaine. De nombreux manuels issus de la tradition occidentale (catholique romaine, protestante, et orthodoxe orientale-byzantine ou orientale-chalcédonienne) qualifient à tort la christologie cyrillienne des Églises orthodoxes orientales-miaphysite comme étant *monophysite*. La christologie monophysite implique cependant une importance moindre et une subordination de l'humanité du Christ. En tant que terme technique, la *théologie monophysite* serait une description appropriée de la théologie du pentecôtisme « unitarien » ('Oneness' en anglais). Le terme *monophysite* n'est pas une caractérisation juste de la christologie copte et orthodoxe éthiopienne ; son utilisation représente une répétition acritique d'anciennes calomnies. (Il faut bien noter que l'orthodoxie orientale byzantine et l'orthodoxie orientale miaphysite

Les christologies *tāwahādo* et *miaphysite* sont toutes deux parfaitement orthodoxes au regard du Credo de Nicée de 325 et du Credo de Nicée-Constantinople de 381, et toutes deux souscrivent pleinement à l'intention de la définition de Chalcédoine qui tente de souligner que le Christ est pleinement Dieu et pleinement humain, mais elles rejettent la formulation *dyophysite* (« deux natures ») de la définition de Chalcédoine au motif qu'elle semblait (aux non-Chalcédoniens) affirmer qu'il y a deux Christs plutôt qu'un seul. La division entre les soi-disant chalcédoniens et les non-chalcédoniens est en grande partie due à un malentendu, car les termes techniques grecs débattus avaient des significations différentes, plutôt qu'une signification unique commune, dans les différents dialectes régionaux du grec. Bien sûr, les rivalités régionales et personnelles ont également joué un rôle. Compte tenu de ses conséquences, c'est à juste titre que le spécialiste de la patristique et historien des missions Andrew F. Walls a qualifié le Concile de Chalcédoine de « grand échec œcuménique du Ve siècle ».²⁶ Je partage cette évaluation et je suggère que nous faisons bien reconnaître ses défis..

Il est bon de souligner que depuis au moins 1964, les Églises orthodoxes orientales-chalcédoniennes et les Églises orthodoxes orientales-non-chalcédoniennes s'accordent à dire que les formulations christologiques chalcédoniennes et cyrilliennes sont toutes deux pleinement orthodoxes, et que les deux parties conviennent que le Christ est *pleinement Dieu et pleinement homme*. De même, depuis 1973, l'Église catholique romaine et l'Église copte orthodoxe sont parvenues au même accord. Dans une déclaration commune publiée en 1984, le pape de l'Église catholique romaine et le patriarche de l'Église orthodoxe syrienne-miaphysite ont déclaré que

Ils réalisent aujourd'hui que les confusions et les schismes qui ont surgi entre leurs Églises au cours des siècles suivants n'affectent ni ne touchent en aucune façon la substance de leur foi, puisqu'ils ne sont dus qu'à des différences de terminologie et de culture, ainsi qu'aux diverses formules adoptées par différentes écoles théologiques pour exprimer la même chose. En conséquence, nous ne trouvons aujourd'hui aucune base réelle aux tristes divisions et schismes qui ont surgi par la suite entre nous au sujet de la doctrine de l'Incarnation. Dans nos paroles et dans notre vie, nous confessons la véritable doctrine concernant le Christ notre

sont toutes deux nicéennes, mais que seule l'orthodoxie byzantine est également chalcédonienne.)

²⁶ Voir Andrew F. WALLS, « The Break-up of Early World Christianity and the Great Ecumenical Failure [La scission du christianisme primitif et le grand échec œcuménique] ».

Seigneur, malgré les différences d'interprétation de cette doctrine qui sont apparues au moment du Concile de Chalcédoine.²⁷

Bien que la terminologie technique puisse prêter à confusion et diviser, et que sa traduction soit difficile, il est important de se rappeler que notre « croyance en la Trinité divine n'est pas seulement une hypothèse théologique abstraite formulée par des théologiens sophistiqués, mais qu'elle a une signification et des implications sérieuses pour la spiritualité et la pratique chrétiennes ».²⁸ Mais comme l'Église universelle a reconnu que Dieu s'est révélé comme Trinité, peut-être qu'au lieu de nous concentrer sur les débats concernant la traduction de la théologie nicéenne, nous devrions nous tourner vers la doxologie et la louange.²⁹

Les autres articles, écrits en anglais, appartiennent à la section éclectique de ce numéro. Emmanuel Oumarou, du Cameroun, explore « La théologie sunomiléenne comme modèle de théologie biblique intercontextuelle : fondements conceptuels et méthodologiques pour théologiser avec les autres », inventant un nouveau terme à partir du verbe συνομιλέω (*sunomilēō*, « converser avec »). Le « discours » théologique sunomiléen d'Oumarou « met ainsi l'accent sur la mutualité, la réciprocité et la corrélation dans la communication ». Rahila L. Jakawa, du Nigeria, propose « Partenaires, pas rivaux : l'inégalité entre les sexes et ses implications pour la participation des femmes au ministère pastoral dans l'Église du Christ ». Enfin, Rachel Fiedler, Rhodian Munyenymbe et Atipatsa Chiwanda Kaminga, tous trois du Malawi, proposent une étude sur « La prévention et les soins pendant la pandémie de Covid-19 : la masculinité, une arme à double tranchant pour les hommes et les femmes occupant des fonctions de direction dans certaines églises urbaines du Malawi ».

Sept livres sont évalués à travers des essais critiques complets. Tout d'abord, Kayle Pelletier propose une critique de l'ouvrage de Samuel Waje Kunhiyop intitulé *African Christian Theology* ('Théologie chrétienne africaine'), une théologie systématique pour l'Afrique. Les quatre critiques suivantes

²⁷ « Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and The Ecumenical Patriarch of Antioch His Holiness Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas [‘Déclaration commune du pape Jean-Paul II et du patriarche œcuménique d'Antioche, Sa Sainteté Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas’] » ; ma traduction.

²⁸ KUNHIYOP, « The Trinity in Africa [‘La Trinité en Afrique’] », p. 55–56 ; ma traduction. Jean-Paul Sagadou pose ainsi une question théologique cruciale : « Comment l'homme, dans lequel est imprimé l'image de la Sainte Trinité, partage-t-il la vie trinitaire ? Et inversement, comment la Trinité pénètre-t-elle de manière nouvelle et entière dans la vie de l'homme ? ». SAGADOU, *À la recherche des traces africaines du Dieu-Trinité : Une approche narrative du mystère trinitaire*, p. 61.

²⁹ C'est également la conclusion de MÜLLER, « The (non)translatability of the Trinity [‘La (non-)traductibilité de la Sainte Trinité’] », p. 8 : « Worshipping the Trinity would be the more appropriate course of action [‘Adorer et vénérer la Trinité serait la ligne de conduite la plus appropriée’] ».

portent sur les réalités contextuelles du christianisme africain. Nathan Scott évalue l'ouvrage d'Adam Simmons intitulé *Nubia, Ethiopia, and the Crusading World, 1095–1402* ('La Nubie, l'Éthiopie et le monde des croisades, 1095–1402').

Nebeyou Alemu Terefe s'intéresse aux traditions éthiopiennes qui remontent au moins au Moyen Âge, mais qui perdurent encore aujourd'hui, dans son évaluation de l'ouvrage d'Alexandra Sellassie Antohin intitulé *The Covenant's Veil: Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition of Elaboration* ('Le voile de l'alliance : tradition orthodoxe éthiopienne de l'élaboration'). Un peu plus au sud et à une époque strictement contemporaine, Kevin Muriithi Ndereba critique l'ouvrage de Kyama Mugambi intitulé *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya* ('Un esprit de revitalisation : le pentecôtisme urbain au Kenya'). Depuis l'Afrique australe, Daniel Andrew examine l'ouvrage collectif édité par Peter White, *Faith, Spirituality and Praxis: Exploring Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches* ('Foi, spiritualité, et praxis : exploration des dynamiques dans les théologies et les Églises africaines populaires'). Nos deux dernières critiques littéraires reviennent au commencement : l'évaluation des Écritures. Bitrus S. Sarma évalue *Creating Community Identity in Matthew's Gospel Narrative* ('Créer une identité communautaire dans le récit évangélique de Matthieu') de Tekalign Duguma Negewo, tandis que Dion A. Forster explore *Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives* ('Lire les épîtres aux Hébreux et 1 Pierre dans une perspective du monde majoritaire'), édité par Sofanit T. Abebe, Elizabeth W. Mburu, et Abeneazer G. Urga.

Nebeyou Alemu Terefe focuses on Ethiopian traditions that extend at least as far back as the medieval period but which continue to the present in his evaluation of Alexandra Sellassie Antohin's *The Covenant's Veil: Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition of Elaboration*. Moving a little south and to strictly contemporary times, Kevin Muriithi Ndereba reviews Kyama Mugambi's *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya*. From southern Africa, Daniel Andrew examines Peter White's edited volume, *Faith, Spirituality and Praxis: Exploring Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches*. Our final two book review essays return to the beginning: the evaluation of Scripture. Bitrus S. Sarma evaluates Tekalign Duguma Negewo's *Creating Community Identity in Matthew's Gospel Narrative* while Dion A. Forster explores *Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives*, edited by Sofanit T. Abebe, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Abeneazer G. Urga.

Enfin, nous présentons quatre brèves critiques du livre, qui introduisent *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* ('La royauté médiévale éthiopienne, l'artisanat et la diplomatie avec l'Europe latine') de Verena Krebs ; *Christianity in Malawi : A Reader* ('Le christianisme au Malawi : un recueil'), édité par Klaus Fiedler et Kenneth R. Ross ; *Who Are My People? Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* ('Qui est mon

peuple ? Amour, violence et christianisme en Afrique subsaharienne'), et *Shame in the Individual Lament Psalms and African Spirituality* ('La honte dans les psaumes de lamentation individuels et la spiritualité africaine') de Mark S. Aidoo.

Ce numéro donne les voix à neuf pays africains —Cameroun, Ghana, Éthiopie, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Afrique du Sud, Ouganda et Zambie (y compris les auteurs des livres critiqués). Si votre pays n'est pas représenté, nous vous encourageons à soumettre un article pour un prochain numéro. Mais pour maintenant — *tolle lege*, « prends et lis ».

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³⁰ Cet article a été précédemment publié sous le titre « The (Non-)Translatability of the Trinity [‘La (non-)traductibilité de la Trinité’] », chapitre 21 dans *Reader in Trinitarian Theology* [‘Recueil de textes sur la théologie trinitaire’], édité par Henco van der Westhuizen, p. 379–393 (Auckland Park, Afrique du Sud: University of Johannesburg Press, 2022).

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³¹ Ce chapitre est une réimpression d'un article du même titre publié dans *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1, no. 1 (1998): 2–16.

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EDITORIAL

Nicéia a 1700 anos

Raízes e Ramos do Cristianismo Africano

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“Nós cremos ...”
— O Credo Niceno¹

Esta edição da Teologia Cristã Africana é uma edição temática que celebra o décimo sétimo centenário do Credo de Nicéia. Para a maioria dos cristãos em todo o mundo, o Credo Niceno de 325 e o Credo Niceno-Constantinopolitano de 381 continuam a ser normativos². Mas muitos rejeitam as articulações nicenas da fé cristã como uma helenização corrompida do cristianismo. Os apelos à *deshelenização* do cristianismo são tão comuns como os apelos à descolonização³. Em junho de 2025, um membro da Comunidade Teológica Africana (*African Theological Fellowship* ou ATF, em Inglês) referiu-se no grupo WhatsApp da ATF à “cristologia ontológica transmitida aos africanos pelos seus senhores escravistas coloniais europeus, impregnada de filosofia e cultura europeias ...” (tradução minha). Em muitos aspetos, na era moderna, os europeus e os euro-americanos não tinham consciência de que a sua expressão

¹ Enquanto o Credo dos Apóstolos posterior começa com o singular gramatical “Eu creio” (*credo* em Latim; é deste termo que deriva a palavra portuguesa “credo”), os Credos Niceno e Niceno-Constantinopolitano anteriores começam ambos com o plural “Nós cremos” (Πιστεύομεν / *Pisteúomen*). Embora a forma singular decorra, sem dúvida, da importância de cada indivíduo possuir a sua própria confissão de fé batismal, acreditamos que a forma plural permite destacar a natureza comunitária da fé cristã. Embora exerçamos a πίστις (*pistis*, ‘fé, crença, lealdade’) como indivíduos, não seguimos o caminho da fé sozinhos, mas em comunidade com outros crentes.

² O Credo Niceno foi formulado durante o Concílio de Nicéia, em 325. Uma revisão esclarecida do Credo Niceno foi formulada pelo Concílio de Constantinopla, em 381.

³ Veja a discussão sobre este ponto em Ernst M. Conradie e Teddy C. Sakupapa, “‘Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity’ or ‘The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity’? [inglês: “Descolonizar a Doutrina da Trindade’ ou ‘A Doutrina Descolonizadora da Trindade?’]”, pp. 367–370 e 375.

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da fé cristã era intrinsecamente contextual, “impregnada da filosofia e da cultura europeias”, como tão bem disse o meu colega. Muitas vezes, confundiam a sua cultura e a sua língua com o cristianismo. Não é raro que isso continue a ser o caso. É absolutamente necessário reconhecer que toda a teologia é contextual e dependente da cultura.

Esse reconhecimento pressupõe uma resposta à pergunta: *A cultura é importante?*, que pode ser formulada mais precisamente da seguinte forma: *A cultura desempenha um papel importante nas nossas formulações teológicas?* Pela minha parte, estou convencido de que a cultura é importante, mas a questão permanece: de que forma ela é importante? Qual é o papel apropriado, incluindo os limites desse papel, da cultura — incluindo as filosofias inerentes às nossas visões de mundo, tanto explícitas como implícitas — na nossa teologização? Diferentes culturas colocam diferentes questões. As respostas dadas por brilhantes teólogos há mil anos, ou quinhentos anos, na Inglaterra, França ou Alemanha, podem não ser relevantes nos nossos contextos africanos, simplesmente porque aqui, em África, colocamos questões diferentes para as quais a teologia cristã ocidental tradicional pode não ter respostas. Permitam-me reformular a minha pergunta: *Quando teologizamos, a cultura tem importância? Se a cultura é importante, qual é o seu papel e função adequados?* Mais especificamente, no contexto das realidades africanas, qual é o papel e a função adequados da cultura africana na nossa teologia (cristã), ou seja, na forma como expressamos a verdade do Evangelho e as suas implicações para o nosso modo de vida?

Passando especificamente às questões da cristologia que estiveram por trás das deliberações do Concílio de Nicéia em 325, à primeira vista, a afirmação do meu colega da ATF parece ignorar o facto de que a cristologia trinitária foi expressa pela primeira vez de forma robusta na *África* e na *Ásia*, e não na Europa — na medida em que a nossa cristologia ontológica é uma teologia contextual, ela representa um mergulho nas filosofias e culturas *africanas* e *asiáticas* tanto quanto, ou mais do que, nas europeias. A cristologia nicena (e niceno-constantinopolitana) tem raízes profundas na África. Quando o teólogo africano Tertuliano cunhou pela primeira vez o termo *trinitas*, em Latim, ele estava a tentar dar sentido ao credo israelita/judaico, o *Shema* — “Ouve, ó Israel, YHWH nosso Deus, YHWH é um” (Dt 6:4) — juntamente com a experiência da Igreja do Jesus ressuscitado. Notavelmente, ele não estava a criar uma nova doutrina — estava apenas a expressar de forma mais concisa o que a Igreja há muito acreditava, confessava e experimentava. É importante lembrar que o

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Latim foi uma língua cristã vernácula *africana* por muitas gerações antes de se tornar uma língua cristã em Roma ou em qualquer outro lugar da Europa⁴.

Tomemos o exemplo do gigante da “cristologia ontológica” — trata-se de Atanásio, um africano (e não um colono grego). Embora Atanásio fosse certamente cosmopolita, sentia-se tão à vontade na multicultural cidade de Alexandria como nas aldeias africanas do vale do Nilo. A sua cristologia não era diferente da de Antônio, o Grande, o santo africano que nunca tinha aprendido grego, mas falava apenas a língua vernácula africana dos seus antepassados. A teologia trinitária sistemática mais conhecida que nos chegou da época patrística é talvez a de Agostinho (354–430)⁵, um homem que se referia a si mesmo e aos seus colegas bispos da região como “nós, os africanos”⁶. Muitos apontam o dedo a “Constantino” e supõem que o Concílio de Nicéia e o Credo de Nicéia não passavam de uma ferramenta do Império. No entanto, esta interpretação errada ignora as realidades históricas. Embora muitos pensem que o Concílio de Nicéia “ocorreu num contexto social em que a Igreja era a religião privilegiada do Estado Romano”⁷, isso é errado. O Concílio de Nicéia foi realizado em 325 d.C., doze anos depois que o Édito de Milão (313 d.C.) retirou o cristianismo da lista de religiões ilegais, e os bispos cristãos certamente gozavam de certa preferência por parte do imperador, mas, nessa altura, ainda não eram mais favorecidos do que os sacerdotes das religiões tradicionais. Ário, ele próprio um berbere africano, foi ordenado presbítero no mesmo ano do Édito de Milão. Mas a controvérsia eclodiu quando Ário considerou que o bispo de Alexandria estava a flertar com a antiga heresia do sabelianismo/monarquianismo. A controvérsia ariana surgiu de um debate entre respostas africanas rivais a questões que diziam respeito aos cristãos africanos.

Além disso, o Concílio de Nicéia foi verdadeiramente ecuménico, com

⁴ Ver Andrew F. WALLS, “Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect [em Inglês: ‘África na história cristã: retrospectiva e perspectivas’],” p. 87.

⁵ O *De Trinitate* de Agostinho merece a sua fama. Mas o cristianismo era policêntrico nas suas origens, e reconhecer o seu policentrismo, bem como a sua natureza multicultural e multilingue, é a correção necessária para um eurocentrismo errado. Não cometamos o erro semelhante de insistir no afrocentrismo. Convém, portanto, mencionar que o *De Trinitate* escrito por Hilário de Poitiers (cerca de 310 – cerca de 357) é sem dúvida superior ao de Agostinho, mesmo que este último tenha tido muito mais influência no cristianismo ocidental, pois Hilário se inspirou mais profundamente na teologia grega do nordeste da África e da Ásia Ocidental. Tal como Atanásio, Hilário foi exilado pela autoridade imperial devido ao seu compromisso inabalável com a ortodoxia nicena.

⁶ Augustine [‘Agostinho’], *Letters of St. Augustin* [‘Cartas de Santo Agostinho’] 138.4.19 (NPNF1 1:697).

⁷ Como diz James H. CONE, *God of the Oppressed* [‘Deus dos oprimidos’], p. 107; ma traduction.

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delegados vindos de fora do Império Romano — da Arménia, da Geórgia, do Império Persa Sassânida e da Índia. Na Pérsia, aderir à ortodoxia nicena era sem dúvida um ato politicamente subversivo, que minava o império. Durante um longo período, isso também foi o caso no próprio Império Romano. A vitória da ortodoxia nicena não era certa. Quando os imperadores romanos, com todo o seu poder, tentavam converter todo o mundo cristão à cristologia ariana ou semi-ariana, o africano Atanásio foi enviado várias vezes para o exílio, em vez de renunciar à sua cristologia africana. É por isso que a tradição cristã ocidental passou a referir-se a *Athanasius contra o mundo* (Latim: ‘Atanásio contra o mundo’). Os frequentes exílios de vários defensores da ortodoxia nicena pelas autoridades imperiais provam suficientemente que o cristianismo ortodoxo (niceno) certamente não era «a religião privilegiada do Estado romano» naquela época. Quando o imperador romano Constâncio II (r. 317–361), filho de Constantino, o Grande, escreveu a Ezana, o rei cristão de Aksum (Etiópia), para pressioná-lo a rejeitar Atanásio e aceitar o bispo ariano nomeado pelo imperador, Ezana recusou (com o apoio dos líderes da Igreja de Aksum).

Reconheço que algumas queixas contemporâneas relativas ao jargão trinitário niceno são justificadas — por exemplo, o teólogo queniano Jesse Mugambi observa que o uso do termo “pessoas” (e provavelmente também dos termos *homoousios* e *homoiousios*!) é tão estranho aos contextos africanos que se torna simplesmente inútil⁸, e o teólogo afro-americano James Cone observa que hoje em dia

A questão da *homoousia* não é uma questão negra. Os negros não se perguntam se Jesus é um com o Pai ou se é divino e humano, embora as formulações ortodoxas estejam implícitas na sua linguagem. Eles perguntam-se se Jesus caminha com eles, se podem ligar-lhe no “telefone da oração” e contar-lhe todos os seus problemas⁹.

⁸ Jesse N. K. MUGAMBI, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* [‘Teologia Cristã Africana: Uma Introdução’], p. 7. A ortodoxia nicena de língua grega reconhece que Deus Filho é *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος, “da mesma essência ou ser”) com Deus Pai. A heresia ariana proclamava que Cristo era apenas *homoiousios* (ὁμοιούσιος, “de essência semelhante”) com o Pai. A ortodoxia nicena também proclama que existe apenas um único Deus e que Deus existe em três *hupostases* (ὑποστάσεις; a forma singular é ὑπόστασις / *hupóstasis* o Pai, o Filho e o Espírito. *Hupostasis* foi traduzido para o Latim como *persona*, o que levou ao uso da linguagem trinitária “Deus em três pessoas” no Português moderno, embora esse uso técnico da palavra “pessoa” não seja (de forma confusa) sinónimo do sentido comum da palavra em Português.

⁹ CONE, *God of the Oppressed* [‘Deus dos oprimidos’], p. 13. Cone continua: “É certo que a afirmação de Atanásio sobre o estatuto do Logos na divindade é importante para a prossecução das pesquisas cristológicas da Igreja. Mas não devemos esquecer que a questão de Atanásio sobre o estatuto do Filho em relação ao Pai não se colocou no contexto histórico dos códigos escravistas e dos escravistas. E se ele fosse um escravo negro na América, tenho a certeza de que teria feito perguntas diferentes. Talvez tivesse questionado o estatuto do

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Mas quando Cone afirma que “quem é Cristo,” tal como definido pela cristologia nicena, “era controlado pela visão grega do que Deus deveria fazer para salvar a humanidade”¹⁰, infelizmente, ele oculta a *africanidade* de Atanásio, as suas raízes profundas na língua e na cultura egípcias/coptas — ou seja, *africanas* — e a forma como os Padres africanos da Igreja primitiva, como Atanásio e Agostinho, respondiam de facto às questões *africanas*.

Embora eu apoie os apelos à descolonização (e à desproselitização), incluindo da teologia cristã, bem como os apelos para levar em consideração os contextos contemporâneos em nossa reflexão teológica, o historiador Robert Louis Wilken revisita o valor dessa antiga teologia contextual:

A noção de que o desenvolvimento do pensamento cristão primitivo representou uma helenização do cristianismo ultrapassou a sua utilidade. ... uma expressão mais adequada seria a cristianização do helenismo ... O pensamento cristão, embora trabalhando em matérias de pensamento e concepções enraizadas na cultura greco-romana, transformou-as tão profundamente que, no final, surgiu algo muito novo¹¹.

Da mesma forma, o biblista queniano Andrew M. Mbuvi confirma a validade da helenização histórica, tanto como tal quanto *também* como modelo a ser seguido em outros contextos.¹²

Admito que o jargão teológico niceno é difícil de compreender para aqueles de nós que não falam grego e copta de Atanásio ou Latim de Agostinho e Tertuliano, bem como para aqueles de nós que talvez dominem várias línguas e culturas africanas contemporâneas, mas que não conhecem bem as culturas africanas antigas. De facto, em Francês corrente, “Deus em três pessoas” soa inevitavelmente a triteísmo¹³, contra o qual o Concílio de Nicéia (325) e o Concílio de Constantinopla (381) tomaram tantas precauções! (Compreendo

Filho em relação aos proprietários de escravos;” traduções minhas. Se as respostas contemporâneas às questões contemporâneas não devem suplantam a cristologia nicena, elas podem e devem *complementar e enriquecer* a teologia nicena.

¹⁰ CONE, *God of the Oppressed* [‘Deus dos oprimidos’], p. 107 ; traduções minhas.

¹¹ Robert Louis WILKEN, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought : Seeking the Face of God* [‘O espírito do pensamento cristão primitivo: Em busca do rosto de Deus’], pp. xvi–xvii.

¹² Andrew M. MBUVI, *African Biblical Studies : Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies* [‘Estudos Bíblicos Africanos: Desmascarando o Racismo e o Colonialismo Incorporados nos Estudos Bíblicos’], p. 123.

¹³ Ironicamente, o termo latino *persona* (que não é sinónimo dos seus descendentes portugueses “persona” ou “pessoa”) foi adotado no Ocidente porque os falantes do Latim temiam que o termo grego ὑπόστασις (*hupóstasis*, geralmente transliterado por “hipóstase”) tivesse “uma conotação triteísta,” o que os falantes gregos procuravam precisamente evitar. Ver James Henry Owino KOMBO, *Theological Models of the Doctrine of the Trinity: Trinity, Diversity and Theological Hermeneutics* [‘Modelos Teológicos da Doutrina da Trindade: Trindade, Diversidade e Hermenêutica Teológica’], p. 43.

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perfeitamente o meu bom amigo, *nana*¹⁴ Jesse Mugambi.) No entanto, desde Atanásio (cerca de 296–373) e Agostinho (354–430) até Yared, o Melodista (anos 500) de Aksoum, na época patrística, passando pelas comunidades cristãs medievais coptas, nubianas e etíopes, até aos milhões de cristãos contemporâneos do Senegal à Eritreia, de Marrocos a Madagáscar e de Angola ao Zimbábue, o Credo não é um simples dogma ocidental, mas também uma doxologia africana que decorre não da especulação filosófica, mas da experiência vivida de Deus em Cristo¹⁵. Além disso, o Credo de Nicéia não foi criado de cima para baixo (e certamente não foi redigido pelo imperador) — os participantes representavam um povo sofredor que acabara de sair de um período de intensa perseguição por parte do Império — e o Credo surgiu como a expressão ecuménica e mundial de uma fé vivida.

O Credo de Nicéia (325) e a sua revisão, o Credo de Nicéia-Constantinopla (381), provêm em partes iguais do testemunho dos apóstolos, do testemunho das Escrituras e da experiência vivida pela Igreja de Deus em Cristo. Desde que Tomé se dirigiu a Jesus ressuscitado dizendo “meu Senhor e meu Deus!” (Jo 20, 28), a Igreja teve dificuldade em conciliar duas declarações de fé: o monoteísmo¹⁶ de “YHWH nosso Elohim, YHWH é um” (Dt 6, 4; minha tradução do hebraico) e a afirmação apostólica primitiva de que Jesus é identificado com YHWH¹⁷. Alguns estudiosos afirmam que tal «cristologia elevada» é necessariamente tardia e não original no movimento cristão. Mas uma leitura imparcial dos documentos do Novo Testamento, dos Padres

¹⁴ Nos dialetos akan, falados principalmente no Gana, “*nana* é um título honorífico neutro que designa uma pessoa idosa viva ou um antepassado. O detentor deste título é considerado como a encarnação dos valores morais da comunidade e, como tal, como representante dos princípios dos antepassados. Este termo é por vezes utilizado como nome próprio.” Rudolf K. GAISIE, correspondência pessoal; minha tradução.

¹⁵ Para a Igreja primitiva, tanto dentro como fora do Império Romano, assim como para os cristãos africanos contemporâneos, “a doutrina da Trindade ... decorre do culto e da vinda pessoal de Deus no Filho e no Espírito Santo,” confirmando “que a Trindade não é, antes de mais nada, um acréscimo à teologia, nem uma simples doutrina abstrata, mas, pelo contrário, uma realidade salvífica vivida em Jesus Cristo e no Espírito Santo.” KOMBO, *Theological Models of the Doctrine of the Trinity* [‘Modelos Teológicos da Doutrina da Trindade’], p. 120; minha tradução.

¹⁶ Enquanto na época de Moisés, Israel talvez venerasse YHWH sob a forma de um *henoteísmo* (ou seja, várias divindades podiam ser reconhecidas, mas o culto e a lealdade eram concedidos a apenas uma) em vez de um *monoteísmo*, no primeiro século, os judeus (quer aceitassem ou não Jesus como Messias) e os convertidos ao cristianismo eram profundamente monoteístas. É por isso que os romanos consideravam os cristãos como “ateus”: os cristãos negavam a existência de qualquer outro deus além do único Deus verdadeiro revelado em Jesus.

¹⁷ Apresso-me a salientar que o que parece contraditório não se exclui necessariamente. Os teólogos podem aprender com os físicos neste ponto. A luz é uma forma de energia em movimento ou um “pacote” material discreto (ou seja, um *fotão*)? A resposta é “ambos.”

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Apostólicos e de fontes externas, como Plínio, o Jovem, mostra claramente que Jesus era venerado “como um deus” (segundo Plínio) desde o início. Em estudos recentes, os trabalhos de Larry Hurtado (1943–2019) demonstraram definitivamente que esse era o caso¹⁸.

Tentar discutir razoavelmente esse mistério — o monoteísmo de “YHWH nosso Elohim é um único YHWH” e a antiga (e bíblica) afirmação de que Jesus é identificado com YHWH — levou às doutrinas ortodoxas da Trindade e da Encarnação. O Credo de Nicéia de 325 foi uma tentativa da Igreja mundial — africana, asiática (até à Índia) e europeia — de articular o que a Igreja sempre e em toda parte acreditou, ao mesmo tempo em que adotava uma linguagem técnica para se proteger contra as heresias cristológicas do arianismo e do adocionismo. Mas como as controvérsias teológicas da época se concentravam principalmente em Cristo, Deus Filho, o Credo de Nicéia dizia simplesmente sobre o Espírito: “cremos ... e no Espírito Santo.” No entanto, acabaram por ser necessários esclarecimentos adicionais, e o Credo de Nicéia-Constantinopla de 381 baseou-se nas Escrituras para desenvolver a declaração de fé. Em relação ao Espírito, ele diz: “cremos ... e no Espírito Santo, Senhor e dador da vida, que procede do Pai¹⁹, que com o Pai e o Filho é adorado e glorificado, que falou pelos profetas.”

“Nomes bíblicos para coisas bíblicas” (ou *Bible names for Bible things* em Inglês) é um slogan popular na tradição cristã em que fui criado, mas ignora a natureza da linguagem e da cultura. Com base nesse princípio de *solo scriptura*²⁰, muitos rejeitam a linguagem técnica da ortodoxia nicena. Mas o *solo scriptura* é muito mais radical do que o *sola scriptura* dos reformadores protestantes; embora possa parecer atraente, não é sustentável. Se o princípio do *solo scriptura* fosse aplicado de forma consistente, o nosso culto seria limitado ao uso do grego, do aramaico e do hebraico. Em última análise, o *solo scriptura*

¹⁸ Ver, nomeadamente, Larry W. HURTADO, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* [‘O Senhor Jesus Cristo: A devoção a Jesus no cristianismo primitivo’].

¹⁹ Os católicos romanos e a maioria dos protestantes acrescentam aqui a cláusula *filioque* [Latim: “e o Filho”], afirmando que o Espírito “procede do Pai e do Filho,” mas trata-se de um acréscimo muito posterior. Uma discussão sobre a controvérsia *filioque* ultrapassa o âmbito do nosso tema aqui. Excluo o termo acima para evitar qualquer anacronismo.

²⁰ A maioria dos leitores conhece as “cinco solas” (*quinque solae* em Latim) da Reforma Protestante: *sola scriptura* (“somente pelas Escrituras”), *sola fide* (“somente pela fé”), *sola gratia* (“somente pela graça”), *solus Christus* (“somente por Cristo”) et *solus Deo gloria* (“glória somente a Deus”). Estes cinco princípios funcionam em conjunto. Mas *solo scriptura* (que os leitores latinos notarão ser gramaticalmente incorreto) refere-se à “Escritura sozinha,” excluindo credos, história, responsabilidade comunitária, etc. Embora *solo scriptura* na prática, ela encontra a sua autoridade na interpretação individual da Escritura, precisamente porque rejeita os conselhos da Igreja, os precedentes, a história e até mesmo o Espírito Santo.

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prejudica o princípio da traduzibilidade²¹ e incentiva o próprio espírito do proselitismo²² que temos razão em rejeitar quando praticado por aqueles que participam no domínio árabe-euro-asiático da África e dos africanos. Encorajo, portanto, cada um de nós a esforçar-se por explorar como o mistério da nossa fé pode ser melhor articulado na nossa época, nas nossas próprias línguas vernáculas e contextos. Ao fazê-lo, devemos ter cuidado para não rejeitar aquilo em que os primeiros séculos da Igreja cristã africana acreditavam e praticavam simplesmente porque os escravistas europeus modernos confessavam nominalmente (mas sem prática significativa) algumas das mesmas coisas. O ressurgimento é importante: “a Igreja africana deve recuperar o seu passado, a sua história e as suas tradições,” lembrando-se de que “a própria essência do cristianismo é trinitária” e que “cada aspecto da vida e da experiência cristã está e deve estar enraizado no Pai, no Filho e no Espírito Santo”²³. Naturalmente, quando passamos para teologias vernáculas — pensando nas línguas contemporâneas da África ou de outros lugares, em vez de insistir nas formas teológicas anglófonas, francófonas ou lusófonas — as diferenças nas nossas articulações teológicas podem ser acentuadas, tal como as formulações teológicas patrísticas e medievais Siríacas e Gə‘əz (*ou* Gueês) parecem bastante diferentes das formulações teológicas Latinas do cristianismo ocidental a que a maioria de nós está mais habituada.

Esta edição começa com um ensaio editorial de Chammah Kaunda, um dos nossos gestores-editores. Na perspectiva de uma (re)descoberta africana indígena do Credo de Nicéia, ele lança um “olhar pentecostal descolonial retrospectivo” sobre a era nicena em “The Echo of Nicene Faith [‘Eco da Fé Nicena’]”. Tal abordagem das articulações nicenas da fé não conduz a uma colonização intelectual helenística do espírito dos africanos, mas pode, pelo

²¹ Ver Kwame BEDIAKO, “Biblical Exegesis in Africa: The Significance of the Translated Scripture [‘Exegese bíblica em África: a importância das Escrituras traduzidas’],” Lamin SANNEH, “Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scripture Translation [‘Evangelho e Cultura: Efeitos Ramificados da Tradução das Escrituras’],” SANNEH, “The Significance of the Translation Principle [‘O Significado do Princípio da Tradução’] » ; Retief MÜLLER, “The (non-)translatability of the Holy Trinity [‘A (não-)traduzibilidade da Santíssima Trindade’],” pp. 1–2; e Andrew F. WALLS, “The Translation Principle in Christian History [‘O princípio da tradução na história cristã’].”

²² Sobre a distinção crucial entre conversão e proselitismo, ver o meu artigo, “Conversion or Proselytization? Being Maasai, Becoming Christian [‘Conversão ou proselitismo? Ser Maasai, tornar-se cristão’],” ver também os trabalhos essenciais de “Conversion and Christian Continuity [‘Conversão e continuidade cristã’]” e “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church [‘Convertidos ou prosélitos? A crise da conversão na Igreja primitiva’].” Para uma discussão resumida em Francês sobre as opiniões de Walls sobre a conversão, consulte Hannes WIHER, “Le prosélytisme : Une évaluation évangélique [‘Proselitismo: Uma Avaliação Evangélica’],” pp. 124–127.

²³ Samuel Waje KUNHIYOP, “The Trinity in Africa : Trends and Trajectories [‘A Trindade em África: Tendências e Trajectórias’],” pp. 66, 65 ; tradução minha.

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contrário, contribuir precisamente para descolonizar “o espírito dos cristãos africanos”. Passemos agora à secção de artigos desta edição, “Out of Africa, For the World: The Nicene Creed of 325 [‘Saindo de África, para o mundo: o Credo Niceno de 325’]” de Sara Parvis, especialista em patrística, explora a dívida que a ortodoxia nicena tem para com a antiga Igreja africana. O nosso segundo artigo, “*Tāwahaḍo* Theologising as a Guide for Ecumenical Fellowship [‘Teologia *Tāwahaḍo* como guia para a comunhão ecuménica’]” de Calum Samuelson, requer algumas explicações adicionais, pois utiliza terminologia Gə‘əz, pouco familiar para a maioria dos nossos leitores²⁴.

Tāwahaḍo é um termo técnico Gə‘əz, também utilizado nas línguas etíopes modernas, como o Amárico e o Tigrigna, que se refere à cristologia das Igrejas Ortodoxas Etíope e Eritreia, afirmando que Cristo tem uma natureza única e unificada. A sua utilização remonta ao Concílio de Calcedónia, em 451, que tentou esclarecer melhor as concepções nicenas. A cristologia *tāwahaḍo* está intimamente ligada à cristologia miafisita²⁵ de Cirilo de Alexandria e à Igreja Ortodoxa Copta. As cristologias *tāwahaḍo* e miafisita são ambas perfeitamente ortodoxas em relação ao Credo Niceno de 325 e ao Credo Niceno-Constantinopolitano de 381, e ambas subscrevem plenamente a intenção da definição de Calcedónia, que tenta sublinhar que Cristo é plenamente Deus e plenamente humano, mas rejeitam a formulação diofisita («duas naturezas») da definição de Calcedónia, com o argumento de que parecia (aos não calcedonianos) afirmar que existem dois Cristos em vez de um só. A divisão entre os chamados calcedonianos e não calcedonianos deve-se em grande parte a um mal-entendido, pois os termos técnicos gregos em debate tinham significados diferentes, em vez de um único significado comum, nos diferentes dialetos regionais do grego. É claro que as rivalidades regionais e pessoais também tiveram um papel importante. Tendo em conta as suas consequências, o especialista em patrística e historiador das missões Andrew F. Walls descreveu, com razão, o Concílio de Calcedónia como “o grande fracasso ecuménico do

²⁴ Gueês (ግዕዝ), por vezes chamado de «Etiópico Antigo», é uma antiga língua semítica afroasiática do sul que era falada no que hoje é a Eritreia e a Etiópia. Tornou-se uma língua cristã antiga, tal como o Grego, o Siríaco, e o Latim.

²⁵ O termo *miaphysite*, derivado de μία φύσις (*mía phýsis*, ‘uma natureza’), descreve a maioria das cristologias não calcedonianas. Refere-se a Cristo como tendo uma natureza única e unificada, ao mesmo tempo plenamente divina e plenamente humana. Muitos manuais da tradição ocidental (católica romana, protestante e ortodoxa oriental-bizantina ou oriental-calcedoniana) qualificam erroneamente a cristologia ciriliana das Igrejas Ortodoxas Orientais-miafisitas como *monofisita*. A cristologia monofisita, no entanto, implica uma menor importância e subordinação da humanidade de Cristo. Como termo técnico, a *teologia monofisita* seria uma descrição apropriada da teologia do pentecostalismo “unitarista” (‘Oneness’ em Inglês). O termo *monofisita* não é uma caracterização justa da cristologia copta e ortodoxa etíope; o seu uso representa uma repetição acrítica de calúnias antigas. (É importante notar que tanto a ortodoxia oriental bizantina como a ortodoxia oriental miafisita são nicenas, mas apenas a ortodoxia bizantina é também calcedoniana.)

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século V²⁶. Concordo com essa avaliação e sugiro que reconheçamos bem os desafios que ela representa.

É importante ressaltar que, pelo menos desde 1964, as Igrejas Ortodoxas Orientais Calcedonianas e as Igrejas Ortodoxas Orientais Não Calcedonianas concordam que as formulações cristológicas calcedonianas e cirilianas são ambas plenamente ortodoxas, e que ambas as partes concordam que Cristo é *plenamente Deus e plenamente homem*. Da mesma forma, desde 1973, a Igreja Católica Romana e a Igreja Ortodoxa Copta chegaram ao mesmo acordo. Numa declaração conjunta publicada em 1984, o papa da Igreja Católica Romana e o patriarca da Igreja Ortodoxa Síria-Miafisita declararam que

Hoje, eles percebem que as confusões e os cismas que surgiram entre as suas Igrejas ao longo dos séculos seguintes não afetam nem tocam de forma alguma a essência da sua fé, uma vez que se devem apenas a diferenças de terminologia e cultura, bem como às diversas fórmulas adotadas por diferentes escolas teológicas para expressar a mesma coisa. Consequentemente, não encontramos hoje nenhuma base real para as tristes divisões e cismas que surgiram posteriormente entre nós a respeito da doutrina da Encarnação. Nas nossas palavras e na nossa vida, confessamos a verdadeira doutrina sobre Cristo, nosso Senhor, apesar das diferenças de interpretação dessa doutrina que surgiram na época do Concílio de Calcedônia.²⁷

Embora a terminologia técnica possa causar confusão e divisão, e sua tradução seja difícil, é importante lembrar que nossa “crença na Trindade divina não é apenas uma hipótese teológica abstrata formulada por teólogos sofisticados, mas tem um significado e implicações sérias para a espiritualidade e a prática cristãs”²⁸. Mas, como a Igreja universal reconheceu que Deus se revelou como Trindade, talvez, em vez de nos concentrarmos nos debates sobre a tradução da

²⁶ Ver Andrew F. WALLS, “The Break-up of Early World Christianity and the Great Ecumenical Failure [‘A divisão do cristianismo primitivo e o grande fracasso ecumênico].”

²⁷ “Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and The Ecumenical Patriarch of Antioch His Holiness Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas [‘Declaração comum do Papa João Paulo II e do Patriarca Ecumênico de Antioquia, Sua Santidade Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas],” tradução minha.

²⁸ KUNHIYOP, “The Trinity in Africa [‘A Trindade em África],” pp. 55–56; tradução minha. Jean-Paul Sagadou oloca assim uma questão teológica crucial:: “Comment l’homme, dans lequel est imprimé l’image de la Sainte Trinité, partage-t-il la vie trinitaire? Et inversement, comment la Trinité pénètre-t-elle de manière nouvelle et entiere dans la vie de l’homme? [‘Como é que o homem, no qual está impressa a imagem da Santíssima Trindade, partilha a vida trinitária? E, inversamente, como é que a Trindade penetra de forma nova e plena na vida do homem?].” SAGADOU, *À la recherche des traces africaines du Dieu-Trinité : Une approche narrative du mystère trinitaire* [‘Em busca das pegadas africanas da Trindade Divina: Uma abordagem narrativa do mistério trinitário’], p. 61; tradução minha.

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teologia nicena, devêssemos voltar-nos para a doxologia e o louvor²⁹.

Os outros artigos, escritos em inglês, pertencem à secção eclética desta edição. Emmanuel Oumarou, dos Camarões, explora “A teologia sunomiléana como modelo de teologia bíblica intercontextual: fundamentos conceptuais e metodológicos para teologizar com os outros”, inventando um novo termo a partir do verbo συνομιλέω (*sunomiléō*, ‘conversar com’). O “discurso” teológico sunomiléen de Oumarou “ênfatiza assim a mutualidade, a reciprocidade e a correlação na comunicação.” Rahila L. Jakawa, da Nigéria, propõe “Parceiros, não rivais: a desigualdade entre os sexos e as suas implicações para a participação das mulheres no ministério pastoral na Igreja de Cristo”. Por fim, Rachel Fiedler, Rhodian Munyenembe e Atipatsa Chiwanda Kaminga, todos os três do Maláui, propõem um estudo sobre “Prevenção e cuidados durante a pandemia da Covid-19: a masculinidade, uma faca de dois gumes para homens e mulheres que ocupam cargos de liderança em algumas igrejas urbanas do Maláui.”

Sete livros são avaliados através de ensaios críticos completos. Em primeiro lugar, Kayle Pelletier propõe une critique de l’ouvrage de Samuel Waje Kunhinyop intitulé *African Christian Theology* (‘Teologia Cristã Africana’), uma teologia sistemática para África. As quatro críticas seguintes incidem sobre as realidades contextuais do cristianismo africano. Nathan Scott avalia a obra de Adam Simmons intitulada *Nubia, Ethiopia, and the Crusading World, 1095–1402* (‘Núbia, Etiópia e o mundo das cruzadas, 1095–1402’).

Nebeyou Alemu Terefe interessa-se pelas tradições etíopes que remontam pelo menos à Idade Média, mas que ainda perduram hoje, na sua avaliação da obra de Alexandra Sellassie Antohin intitulada *The Covenant’s Veil: Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition of Elaboration* (‘O véu da aliança: Tradição ortodoxa etíope da elaboração’). Um pouco mais ao sul e numa época estritamente contemporânea, Kevin Muriithi Ndereba critica a obra de Kyama Mugambi intitulada *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya* (‘Um espírito de revitalização: o pentecostalismo urbano no Quênia’). Da África Austral, Daniel Andrew analisa a obra coletiva editada por, *Faith, Spirituality and Praxis: Exploring Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches* (‘Fé, espiritualidade e práxis: explorando as dinâmicas nas teologias e igrejas populares africanas’). As nossas duas últimas críticas literárias voltam ao início: a avaliação das Escrituras. Bitrus S. Sarma avalia *Creating Community Identity in Matthew’s Gospel Narrative* (‘Criando uma identidade comunitária na narrativa do Evangelho de Mateus’) de Tekalign Duguma Negewo, enquanto Dion A. Forster explora *Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World*

²⁹ Essa é também a conclusão de MÜLLER, “The (non)translatability of the Trinity [‘A (não-) traduzibilidade da Santíssima Trindade’],” p. 8: « Worshipping the Trinity would be the more appropriate course of action [‘Adorar e venerar a Trindade seria a conduta mais apropriada’].”

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Perspectives ('Ler Hebreus e 1 Pedro a partir de perspectivas do mundo maioritário'), editado por Sofanit T. Abebe, Elizabeth W. Mburu e Abeneazer G. Urga.

Por fim, apresentamos quatro breves críticas do livro, que introduzem *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* ('A realeza medieval etíope, o artesanato e a diplomacia com a Europa latina) de Verena Krebs; *Christianity in Malawi: A Reader* ('O cristianismo no Malawi: uma coletânea'), editado por Klaus Fiedler e Kenneth R. Ross; *Who Are My People? Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* ('Quem é o meu povo? Amor, violência e cristianismo na África Subsaariana'), et *Shame in the Individual Lament Psalms and African Spirituality* ('A vergonha nos salmos de lamentação individuais e a espiritualidade africana') de Mark S. Aidoo.

Esta edição dá voz a nove países africanos — Camarões, Gana, Etiópia, Quênia, Maláui, Nigéria, África do Sul, Uganda e Zâmbia (incluindo os autores dos livros criticados). Se o seu país não estiver representado, encorajamo-lo a enviar um artigo para uma próxima edição. Mas, por agora — *tolle lege*, « pegue e leia. »

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³⁰ Este artigo foi publicado anteriormente como “The (Non-)Translatability of the Trinity [‘A (não) traduzibilidade da Trindade’]”, capítulo 21 em *Reader in Trinitarian Theology* [‘Leitor em Teologia Trinitária’], editado por Henco van der Westhuizen, 379–393 (Auckland Park, África do Sul: University of Johannesburg Press, 2022).

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³¹ Este capítulo é uma reimpressão de um artigo com o mesmo título publicado *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1, no. 1 (1998): 2–16.

³² Este artigo foi republicado como “The Translation Principle in Christian History [‘O Princípio da Tradução na História Cristã’],” capítulo 3 em *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* [‘O Movimento Missionário na História Cristã: Estudos sobre a Transmissão da Fé’], 26–42 (Maryknoll, Nova Iorque, EUA: Orbis Books, 1996).



EDITORIAL ARTICLE

The Echo of Nicene Faith

A Decolonial Pentecostal Back-gaze

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*A Letter from an Archbishop of the Formerly Persecuted Church*¹

To the Most Reverend and Like-Minded Brothers, Bishops of the Formerly Persecuted, I Send Greeting in the Lord.

Grace to you, beloved brothers, and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

As the blessed Apostle Jude urged the faithful in his day, “I found it necessary to write to you, exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). In this same spirit, driven not by idle words but by an aching heart and a soul burdened by the gravity of our time, I write to you now.

It has been nearly twelve years since the Lord, in His mercy, delivered us from the terror of the Great Persecution. And though the Edict of Milan promised tolerance, we know that paper proclamations cannot so quickly erase what blood and fire have written upon the flesh and memory of God’s people. The empire wears the mask of peace, but the scars of that long night remain upon us. They are written in the missing limbs of our confessors, in the disfigured faces of the martyrs who survived, and in the lingering terror in the eyes of those who still wake at night, hearing in their minds the phantom sounds of soldiers at the door.

Many of our people cannot bring themselves to gather in public, even now. There are homes where shutters remain closed, and children have never seen the inside of a church for fear that a public gathering might yet invite another round of death. As shepherds of these bruised flocks, we daily wrestle not only with theological error and external threats but with the hidden wounds of those who

¹ This is a fictional “historical letter” — my imagined back-gaze at the beginning of the Nicene era. Scripture quotations included in this letter, and throughout the article, are taken from NIV-2011.

survived by denying their Lord, and who now walk the uneasy road of repentance.

I must tell you of one among them. A widow in my parish, Maria, whose husband was torn to pieces by beasts for refusing to recant. In the days of terror, he hid her in a pit latrine as soldiers hunted the faithful. By the grace of the Lord, she managed to free herself from that pit of filth after days of struggling. But her ordeal was not over. She ran to hide in a hole in the mountains, surviving for months on wild leaves, roots, and meagre scraps that her former non-Christian neighbour dared to drop in secret. In that lifeless hole in the mountains, she went into labour, and, by the mercy of God, gave birth to a frail, malnourished boy — a child who, against all odds, drew breath in the world. He is now the only child of his age in our parish, his frailty a living testimony to both the horror we endured, and the life God calls forth from death itself.

The mother, though she survived, is a ghost of her former self. She sleeps little, haunted by sights and sounds no soul should carry. Her body bears the marks of starvation and exposure, but it is her spirit that most grieves me — brittle, tormented, sometimes speaking of death as though it were still at the door. I confess to you, my brothers, this is not uncommon. Many among our people remain captives to memories of torture, betrayal, and loss. A recent testimony from a young girl, the only survivor of her family, recounts the horror she witnessed. Her father was hacked to pieces before her eyes, her two brothers were tortured and slain, and her mother was raped and tortured for days before being hanged. She was left behind because one of the soldiers believed that nature would finish what they had started. For two years, she remained isolated, and one can only wonder how she survived. When found by one of the faithful, her behaviour had regressed to an animal-like state. It took five years of care and restoration to return her to something resembling normalcy. The world says we are free, but if you ask the hearts of the faithful, you will find the festering wounds and iron chains that still bind us.

Yet now, amid these wounds, comes a new burden: the Council of Nicaea. We have been called, 318 bishops and scholars from across the world, summoned by the emperor himself. And though it may appear on the surface a gathering of clerics and scholars, you know as well as I that it is a battleground. It is spiritual warfare. The Arian controversy has inflamed old fears and planted new divisions. That Arius dares to persist in his teaching, before the bodies of the martyrs are cold in the grave, so soon after their blood cried out from the earth, is a grief too deep for words.

The people murmur, and not without reason, that if we fail to speak with one voice, we risk not only heresy but the return of persecution. The emperor's enemies, it is said, plot to restore the old imperial cult, emboldened by the Church's divisions. Many of our polytheistic neighbours resent what they see as Christianity's remaking of the empire's soul into a monotheistic monarchy. Should this Council fail, should the bishops scatter like those at Babel, the consequences are beyond imagining.

But dear brothers, for months I have been praying, fasting, and earnestly seeking the face of the Lord. My spirit has been restless, burdened with a heaviness I could not easily name. Then, just yesterday, I heard the voice of the

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Spirit whisper, "Peace be with you. Do not let your heart be troubled. I will fight for you." In that moment, a deep conviction settled within me: this is no mere ecclesial disagreement, no idle exercise in philosophical abstraction. It is spiritual warfare. The enemy is agitated by our peace, by our persistence, by the very possibility of clarity in the midst of confusion — and he is pushing back. We must remember the words of Scripture: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). What we face transcends human debate; it is a contest of spirits, and it must be discerned, confronted, and overcome in the power of God. We stand in the midst of an invisible battlefield and our true adversary is not Arius. As Saint Paul reminds us, "For though we live in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh. The weapons of our warfare are not the weapons of the world. Instead, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We tear down arguments and every presumption set up against the knowledge of God; and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, as soon as your obedience is complete" (2 Corinthians 10:3–6). The adversary of our souls seeks to exploit our divisions, to sow discord, and to silence the eternal Word of the Father through the Son.

I confess to you, with trembling hand, that though we fast and pray, it sometimes feels as if the heavens are silent. Fear gnaws at our hearts. Some nights, I wake and ask myself whether another emperor, one more wicked than the last, might yet arise. It happened, you know, in Egypt when a new king, a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, began persecuting the people of God (Exodus 1:8). The momentary peace we have should not be taken for granted. We must do everything through the power of the Spirit to ensure that peace is sustained. What if another emperor arises who will drive us back underground, burn our churches, and hunt our children? And what of that little boy born in darkness? Will he live to see a Church at peace, or must he too learn to pray with his face to the earth in secret?

God raised this Emperor for us, and it is now our time to fight for the peace of God in the empire. The prophet Jeremiah (29:7) reminds us, "Pray to the Lord for the city, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Brothers, our peace and safety are tied to the peace of this empire.

And yet, yet, I believe that the gathering at Nicaea is no accident. It is, in truth, a miracle. The work of the Spirit. That men whose bodies still bear the brands of torture, who have lost family and flock to the sword, should now convene, not in hiding, nor in fear, but by imperial summons, is itself a testimony to the providence of God. The same God who raised Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and Cyrus, king of Persia, to accomplish his purposes for Israel has now raised Emperor Constantine to contend for and to unite his Church.

Yet the Creed we shall craft must not be a mere formula of words, a sterile accommodation to power or convenience. It must be our confession, our defiant hymn sung before the thrones of earth and hell alike. A declaration that the Son of God is eternal, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father. That He was raised from the dead through the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father

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alone.² And that through Him, by His cross, resurrection, and ascension, empires rise and fall, but the Church endures. It will endure, not merely as an institution, but as a living, Spirit-filled body that shall rise at the end of history to reign with Christ in everlasting glory.

Therefore, I charge you, most reverend brothers, to call your congregations to a season of solemn fasting and prayer. Pray for unity of heart and clarity of mind. Pray that the demonic spirit of heresy may be silenced, and the truth of our Lord Jesus Christ prevail. Pray that God would stretch out His hand once more to strengthen His people and confound His enemies. For if we fail in this, I fear it will not be merely the faith of bishops that suffers, but the souls of the widows, the fatherless, the little ones, and those yet unborn.

May the God who silences empires, humbles kings, and raises the poor from the ash heap, sustain us in this hour. May the Spirit of truth lead us into all truth. May we have the mind of Christ and may the cloud of martyrs bear witness before the throne. And may the Church militant contend faithfully in these days of trial.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

— the Archbishop of the Formerly Persecuted Church

Introduction

The Nicene faith reverberates through the annals of Christian history, its sacred truths proclaimed with unwavering clarity and solemn authority. Rooted in the ecumenical council of Nicaea, this creed stands as a definitive articulation of orthodox doctrine, affirming the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father and the foundation of the Church's catholic unity. The echo of the Nicene faith persists not merely as a historical proclamation but as a living testimony, continually shaping the Church's worship, theology, and proclamation — even in contexts where it remains contested, ambiguous, sidelined, or even outrightly rejected. In often inexplicable ways, it sustains the faithful in their adherence to apostolic truth, providing spiritual coherence and doctrinal stability amidst the vicissitudes of time and theological controversy.

Since this article is framed through a decolonial Pentecostal analysis, I have situated my approach within a fictional historical letter designed to immerse the reader in the testimony and imagined lived experiences that may have shaped Nicene theology. This method offers a perspective that not only deepens engagement but also provides critical insight into the historical context of the Nicene Creed in 325 CE, challenging dominant narratives and highlighting marginalised voices within the formation of early Christian doctrine. It invites the reader into the world of the early Church, where the Creed was forged

² Note well that the *filioque* (Latin: 'and the Son') clause is a late addition to the Creed, and was not included in the original text of either the Nicene Creed of 325 or the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.

amidst intense theological, political, and social tensions. This letter aims not only to draw attention to the profound stakes involved — the preservation of Christian orthodoxy, the unity of the Church, and the clarity of the gospel message — but also to explore the nuanced interpretations of the events surrounding the Council's convocation. It illuminates the anxiety and uncertainty felt by the bishops and their congregations, whose lives and faith were inextricably bound to the decisions that would be made.

A decolonial Pentecostal *back-gaze* on the circumstances leading to the formulation of the Nicene Creed reveals that the convening of the Council was nothing short of miraculous. It was the work of the Spirit.³ This momentous event unfolded through a confluence of divine providence, doctrinal conflict, and ecclesiastical struggle, ultimately shaping the very foundation of Christian identity for centuries to come.⁴ The Creed itself was not merely a theological statement but a resounding proclamation of God's glory. The Council became a battleground where God confronted the powers and principalities of darkness, not through the defeat of Arius himself, but by dismantling the spiritual forces that sought to manipulate the Church and lead it to self-destruction. In this pivotal moment, the forces of darkness, ruling in the heavenly realms, were overthrown, and the Church was preserved from the destructive grip of divisive teaching. By situating my argument within the framework of a fictional historical letter, I aim to move readers beyond the formal setting of the Council and into the lived world where theological ideas were being contested, nourished, and embodied. This narrative device invites readers to grasp that what was truly at stake was not merely the condemnation of Arius's heresy, which refers to the theological positions or teachings of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius, but the very locus of deliberation itself — the conditions under which doctrine was debated, faith was expressed, and communal survival was negotiated. For the bishops gathered at Nicaea, the pressing concern extended beyond the emperor's desire to unify the empire through a single expression of Christianity. Their deeper preoccupation was to secure a lasting safeguard against the ever-present threat of persecution, which had long scarred their congregations.

³ Several theologians and church historians have interpreted the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) as an event guided by the Holy Spirit, even describing it as a miraculous moment in the history of the Church. See for example, Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*; John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*.

⁴ For a testimonial approach to this history see Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*.

Even if Arius had not advanced his particular theological propositions, the need to articulate a coherent, unified, and imperially sanctioned expression of Christian faith would have remained an historical inevitability for the Church that existed not only within but also far beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire.⁵ The fourth century was a period marked by intense spiritual warfare that manifested through the complex intersections of theological controversy, ecclesial identity crisis, the persistence of Roman polytheism and imperial cult worship, and the politics of power, violence, and persecution.⁶ The so-called “Arian controversy” certainly served as a proximate cause for the Council of Nicaea, yet it was not the sole force driving the formulation of the Nicene Creed.⁷ Rather, the consolidation of imperial Christianity under Constantine demanded theological clarity and institutional cohesion to preserve both doctrinal unity and political stability. Scholars such as R. P. C. Hanson, Lewis Ayres, and Hilaire Belloc have argued that the Council should not be read merely as a reactive response to Arius, but as the culmination of deeper debates about the nature of Christ, the ontology of the Trinity, and the limits of theological diversity within the emerging Catholic orthodoxy. In this regard, Arius served as the immediate catalyst, but the broader ecclesiastical and imperial pressures rendered the process of doctrinal codification both historically inevitable and a contested site of spiritual conflict. Historians recognise that this period marked not only the formalization of orthodoxy but also a struggle in which spiritual arguments and forces that sought to undermine the knowledge of God were subject to intellectual and theological scrutiny.⁸ The Church, in this sense, was engaged in a profound spiritual warfare, one that required the subjugation of every thought to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:3–6).

Thus, this doctrinal struggle can be understood as a significant victory over demonic forces in the history of Christian thought, shaped by both theological debate and the external pressures of imperial and ecclesiastical authority. While the language of spiritual warfare is often avoided by many historians and secularized theologians, it remains integral to the Christian tradition, which has, from its inception, recognised an ongoing struggle against forces of darkness.

⁵ It is also important to note that prior to the Council of Constantinople in 381, the Nicene party was primarily engaged in opposing the Empire rather than in being allied with it. While the Council marked a notable triumph for them, this victory was far from guaranteed and was viewed as almost as miraculous as Nicaea in 325. Yet even after 381, the Nicene party in the Persian Empire remained largely subaltern.

⁶ See Charles Freeman, *A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans, and the Dawn of the Monotheistic State*; and Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome*.

⁷ It is important to underline that they were representatives from Georgia and Armenia and Persia and India in attendance at the Council, which making it truly ecumenical without limiting the *ecumené* to the bounds of Roman jurisdiction.

⁸ See Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*.

In this context, the Nicene settlement can be seen not so much as a singular theological miracle, but as a necessary moment of ecclesial self-definition, forged through resistance to both spiritual opposition and secular pressure. This period reveals that the categories of orthodoxy and heresy were not merely abstract theological constructs; they were also inextricably linked to lived ecclesiastical experiences and the political dynamics of the time, where imperial power was sometimes wielded as a tool for God's purposes. The Nicene Creed, therefore, should be understood as both a doctrinal declaration and a product of political pragmatism, shaped by the intersection of theological convictions and imperial authority.⁹

However, one should not forget that many of these bishops carried the marks — both literal and spiritual — of past persecutions, and the Council was as much about theological clarity as it was about ecclesial survival in an unpredictable political landscape. A unified Church, in sound relationship with the emperor, was seen as essential for preserving the freedom to worship and teach the faith openly. To have imperial favour was not mere convenience; it was a matter of existential importance at least for those Christians who lived within the Roman Empire.¹⁰ Thus, the Nicene Council was not simply a victory over Arianism, but a decisive moment in which God, through the Church, confronted and overcame the forces of darkness that sought to destabilize the Christian community from within and without. It was, at its core, a triumph of divine sovereignty over the unseen powers that rule in the heavenly realms, working through history, politics, and ecclesial struggle to secure the Church's witness for generations to come.

The Nicene Creed thus stands as a victorious declaration of divine triumph, a testament to the unyielding sovereignty of God amidst the chaotic struggles of human history. Hence, the Creed emerged as a bold ecclesial witness and a historical testament to a God who takes what the world deems impossible and turns it into a stage for His glory. To declare that nothing is impossible with God (Matt 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 1:37, 18:27) is no convenient platitude; it is a thunderous rebuke to the despair of history, a divine laughter in the face of polytheism, and a scornful mockery of the worldly powers that presume to exalt

⁹ See H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*; R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381*; Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*; and Hilaire Belloc, *The Great Heresies*.

¹⁰ Many Christians lived outside the Roman Empire, and their experiences varied widely. Those in Georgia, Armenia, and Axum (and later in Nubia as well) often faced circumstances comparable to one another, while the majority in the Persian Empire and India encountered distinct challenges. In Yemen, for example, Christians moved from tolerance to persecution until rescued by the army of the Aksumite Christian king. There has never been a single, unified narrative of Christian experience, nor a fully uniform theological perspective — a diversity that remains evident, for instance, in Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

themselves above God. God took one of the most ferocious, hate-fuelled persecutions the world had ever known and forged from its ashes a Spirit-empowered unity, compelling the Church to rise in defiance of death itself, renew its identity and publicly proclaim a faith that neither sword, fire, nor imperial decree could extinguish.

If, as scholars have argued, the Tower of Babel marked the scattering of humanity through the confusion of tongues — as the desire for the unity of language was weaponized in service of uniformity, self-exaltation, and rebellion against God — then the many tongues that emerged at Babel were not merely a judgment, but a merciful scattering, a divine intervention to frustrate idolatrous defiance and fulfil God's command to fill the earth. Pentecost, then, was not merely a reversal of Babel but its eschatological fulfilment — a miraculous recovery of what was lost, as the Spirit descended and empowered the apostles to speak in other tongues. It was not a return to monolithic uniformity, but a divine affirmation of diversity reconciled in the unity of the Spirit. The many tongues now proclaimed one Gospel.¹¹ In this light, Nicaea stands as the providential consolidation of both Babel and Pentecost — a unifying of scattered voices and Spirit-inspired tongues into one catholic tongue: the Creed. It became the Church's universal language of faith, not forged by imperial will or human consensus, but by divine providence. The Nicene Creed spoke with clarity and power into an age desperate for certainty, hope, and theological coherence. It gathered the disparate voices of a persecuted, fragmented Church and gave them a common confession — not to erase their differences, but to proclaim together the unchanging truth of the God who reigns, the Christ who redeems, and the Spirit who unites.

On the surface, the Nicene Creed may appear as little more than a theological artifact shaped by imperial politics — and indeed, it bears the marks of its historical context. Yet beneath that surface, on the subliminal and spiritual plane, it was far more than that. If one were a Christian emerging from the vicious, soul-crushing persecutions of that era, one would recognise that the circumstances surrounding the Creed's formation were orchestrated by the One who sits enthroned in heaven. As much as modern historical debates might probe political motives and imperial pressures — and as sound as such analyses may sometimes be — they would never have persuaded a bishop summoned to Nicaea that what they were engaged in was a merely political exercise. The very act of calling persecuted bishops from across the empire to deliberate together was, in itself, miraculous. It was a divine intervention.

And this, crucially, must be distinguished from the inevitable limitations of

¹¹ For detailed discussions of this, see Edward Davies, *Pentecost and Glossolalia*; Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*; Mark J. Cartledge, ed., *Speaking in Tongues: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*.

human beings in formulating the Creed. The frailty of human language and judgment does not negate the reality of divine intervention in history. God acts — decisively, providentially, redemptively — but what humanity does with that intervention is always marked by its own weakness. And this is as it should be, for to be human is to bear both glory and frailty in tension.

Thus, the unified struggle to formulate a coherent confession of faith was, at its core, a recognition of the one true God — the God who has eternally revealed Godself through Jesus Christ and poured out his Spirit upon all flesh. This is the God who silences his enemies, summons nations to judgment, humbles kings and emperors, and turns even the most defiant rulers into unwitting servants of His providential will. The Nicene faith sought to confess this God — articulating the mystery of God's being within the finite limitations of human language, yet doing so in the most provocative, philosophically rigorous, and theologically persuasive terms available.

The Church as the Crossroads

The existential crisis facing the early Church was not simply about doctrinal precision but about survival, identity, and eschatological fidelity. The Church was tasked with forging a confession that was not only coherent and rationally defensible in a Hellenistic intellectual world but one that bore the weight of eternal consequence — a testimony that would summon the nations, confront the powers, and declare the lordship of Christ over history itself. That this testimony emerged from the Greek-speaking world was no historical coincidence; it was a deliberate, providentially ordained act. Every true testimony seeks not merely to proclaim but to persuade — to convince the heart, satisfy the mind, and remain biblically faithful while answering the most critical and contested questions of its age. The Nicene Creed, therefore, stands as a theological monument to the Church's eschatological hope, philosophical engagement, and unyielding witness to the God who reigns, the Christ who redeems, and the Spirit who empowers.

After centuries of persecution and existing on the margins, Christians were compelled to view themselves as a distinctive community.¹² The so-called Great Persecution or Diocletian Persecution began in 303 and ended after eight years in 313 with the ascension of Emperor Constantine the Great. Constantine was the first Roman emperor to accept Christianity but did not receive baptism until

¹² The *Epistle to Diognetus* refers to Christianity as “this new γένος or practice” (καινὸν τοῦτο γένος ἢ ἐπιτήδευμα). The earliest extant appearance of the phrase “third γένος” (typically rendered as “third race”) with reference to Christians set against Jews and Greeks is Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.1–6 (though Clement is citing the earlier *Petrou Kerygma* by an unknown author). According to Erich S. Gruen, this language reflects not “ethnic identification” but rather “the context of religious worship and observances.” Gruen, “Christians as a ‘Third Race’: Is Ethnicity at Issue?,” 241–242.

on his deathbed; with the Edict of Milan, he ended the persecution of its adherents and Christianity was granted recognition as a *religio licita* and as such was no longer subject to official state persecution.¹³ It was Constantine who also abolished the cult of worshipping the Roman emperor as a god — a practice that began with Julius Caesar, who saw himself as *Deo Invicto* ('unconquered god'). The influence of the Imperial Cult had gradually expanded, making the emperor an embodiment of religion. By the time of Hadrian (ruled AD 117–138), the power of the emperors had become so absolute and consolidated that the cult effectively became a civil religion, and worshipping the emperor was not just a religious act but also a measure of political loyalty. Joseph Bryant underlines, "Romans regarded religion as the very foundation of their state, with religious concerns and political interests inextricably interwoven . . . In short, any analysis which fails to appreciate the distinct civic-based religiosity of the pagans can hardly do justice to the complicated story."¹⁴ Religion was intricately woven into the fabric of every aspects of imperial life and provided the compelling touchstone of legitimacy or the love of the emperor by the citizens; the motive for exercising power; reason to obey and be obeyed; the determinant of the moral standards and style of power and the engine that moved imperial system of governance. In this context, the structure of governance had tremendous impact on the modes of religious expression and religion could not be conjured out of politics.¹⁵ This practice persisted until 380, when Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica.¹⁶ However, where there are too many gods, there is no God. By the time Constantine became Emperor, ongoing violence had undermined and contributed to the decay of the Imperial Cult, setting it on an irreversible downfall.¹⁷ The Roman world was deeply entrenched in all forms of violence (e.g., dutiful violence), which played a significant role in the construction of Roman identity and the harmonization of the empire.¹⁸ Images

¹³ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*.

¹⁴ Joseph M. Bryant, review of *The Christians and the Roman Empire* by Marta Sordi (translated by Anna Bedini), 88.

¹⁵ See Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*; and also Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*.

¹⁶ This edict represents the political triumph of Nicene Christianity, as by its Nicene orthodoxy became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. The Edict also allowed for the punishment of heretics; it represents a key milestone on the road to the establishment of Christendom in the West.

¹⁷ This story has been told by many. E.g., see Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; Eusebius, *The History of the Church*; and Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of violence in the Roman world, see Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. For a more recent analysis, see Susann S. Lusnia, "Representations of War and Violence in Ancient Rome."

of war and aggression permeated every aspect of society, leaving an indelible mark on Roman culture.¹⁹

These symbolic violence and violent images were constructed as visual ideological imperial apparatuses,²⁰ serving as potent reminders of Roman hierarchical power structures. They symbolized the power of citizens over non-citizens; the authority of the imperial cult and polytheism over dissenting religions; and the dominance of Roman men over women, children, slaves, and clients. Furthermore, they underscored the overarching power of the emperor over his subjects, as well as over foreigners and anyone perceived as a threat to the welfare of Rome.²¹ However, against all odds and despite great persecution, a non-violent monotheistic (dissenting) religion, the stone rejected by the builders, was steadily becoming the cornerstone. Christianity had managed to embed itself in the minds of the people, “growing in silence and obscurity, deriving new vigour from opposition, and finally raising the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol.”²² As Edward Gibbon noted, Christianity’s influence was not “confined to the period or to the limits of the Roman Empire.”²³

However, the establishment of Christianity as the official religion was the consequence of the revolution that was taking place in the Roman Empire.²⁴ Aristotle Papanikolaou and George Demacopoulos state:

At the time of Constantine’s conversion, Christians were not yet the majority within the Roman Empire and it was not necessarily inevitable that they would succeed in Christianizing the Roman Empire. In hindsight, it is clear that the emperor’s conversion facilitated this Christianization and, in the process, forged a new relation of the still-evolving institutional Church to the imperial state, as well as to the culture and traditions of Roman civilization.²⁵

It is important to remember that the fact that Constantine had adopted Christianity does not mean that he had completely abandoned the Roman imperial cultural interpretive framework. It is safe to say that he had done what in contemporary theological language is classified as inculturation, where Christianity was appropriated through the Roman imperial cultural

¹⁹ Lusnia, “Representations of War and Violence in Ancient Rome.”

²⁰ For the explanation of the concept of “ideological state apparatuses”, see Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, 85–126.

²¹ Lusnia, “Representations of War and Violence in Ancient Rome,” 654.

²² Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 332.

²³ Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 332.

²⁴ Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 332.

²⁵ Aristotle Papanikolaou and George E. Demacopoulos, “Outrunning Constantine’s Shadow,” 4.

framework.²⁶ Thus, Christianity and politics became inextricably intertwined in keeping with the normative Roman cultural worldview. Paul Stephenson observes, “the army embraced Constantine’s conversion because it was explained to them within the established Roman theology of victory: Constantine held himself to be, because he truly believed himself to be, the vehicle for that god’s will, as demonstrated on the field of battle. His reign is a case study in the interaction of faith and power.”²⁷ He saw himself in terms of the traditional philosophies of kinship, according to which “the ruler was brought down from heaven as a light from the sun, looked to heaven for guidance, imitated on earth the heavenly governance, reflected the sun’s light on his people, and brought them liberty and salvation.” Jonathan Bardill argues that this thinking is traceable “in the works of late Antique writers who described emperors as participating in the divine force (*numen*) emanating from their protective deity and as generating a salvific light.”²⁸ It is important to make a quick commentary on the idea of the gospel within its Roman Imperial Cult context.

According to Arthur J. Dewey, the term ‘gospel’ (εὐαγγέλιον / *euangélion* in Greek; *evangelium* in Latin) was a Roman cultural idiom that also carried imperialistic undertones in the Roman Empire. It was a culturally constructed term that within all the contradictions in its utilisation carried behind it the fundamental principle that would become to be equated with Christ as the timeless and pre-existing ‘gospel.’ Christ is the gospel not because Christianity invented the term but Christian intellectuals such as the Apostle Paul unveiled the implicit universal kernel that had always existed behind the term. Christ was anterior to the term ‘gospel’.²⁹ Dewey, adds,

It is often assumed that the term ‘gospel’ (*euangelion*) occurs only within the context of the New Testament. Of course, many scholars have made a distinction between the use of this word by Paul and the writers of the Gospels, but this still limits ‘gospel’ to its use within the canon. By confining the word to this context investigators remain insensible to how it was heard within the probable echo chamber of the ancient world.³⁰

This perspective appears to have led many theologians to draw a distinction between the ‘gospel’ and culture. For them, the term ‘gospel’ is uniquely Christian, referencing Christ and his redemptive work. However, scholars have

²⁶ See Jonathan Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*; and Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor*.

²⁷ Stephenson, *Constantine*, 9.

²⁸ Bardill, *Constantine*, 103.

²⁹ Arthur J. Dewey, “Competing Gospels: Imperial Echoes, A Dissident Voice,” 64–65.

³⁰ Dewey, “Competing Gospel,” 65.

shed light on the historical context, revealing that the term was originally utilized as part of the Roman propaganda apparatus to uphold and perpetuate the Augustan revolution. The strength of Christianity lies in its ability for cultural *ressourcement*, enabling it to harness culturally normative idioms and transform them into dissenting and subversive tools that promote abundant life. It is this capacity that makes the gospel powerful as it emerges behind every culture as dissonant voice and presenting itself as always already an affront to the normative cultural utilisation of terms. It is this approach to ingenious idioms that redeems them and their usage so that they can promote the fullness of life. The concept of ‘the gospel’ from its inception was deeply entrenched with the idea of universality. As could be seen from Augustus self-proclamation as Frederick Grant observes, “The god Augustus, Son of God, Caesar, Autocrat [*Autokratōr*, i.e., absolute ruler] of land and sea, the Benefactor and Savior of the whole cosmos, the people of Myra [acknowledge, or, have set up this statue].”³¹ This is the context in which the patristic christological title of *Pantokrator* (παντοκράτωρ) makes sense. Indeed, to recognize someone who was crucified as *Pantakrator* was inherently subversive.

Grant quotes a religio-political decree of the Province of Asia (eastern Türkiye) from 9 BC:

Whereas the Providence [*Pronoia*] which has regulated our whole existence, and which has shown such care and liberality, has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us [the emperor] Augustus, whom it [Providence] filled with virtue for the welfare of men, and who, being sent to us and our descendants as a Savior [*Sōtēr*], has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and [whereas,] having become manifest [*phaneis*], Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times . . . , not only in surpassing all the benefactors [*euergetai*] who preceded him but also in leaving to his successors no hope of surpassing him; and whereas, finally, the birthday of the god [Augustus] has been for the whole world the beginning of good news [*euaggelion*] concerning him [therefore, let a new era begin from his birth, and let his birthday mark the beginning of the new year].³²

Grant then shares an inscription from sometime between 2 BC and AD 14 found in Halicarnassus (Bodrum, Türkiye):

Since the eternal and deathless nature of the universe has perfected its immense benefits to mankind in granting us as a supreme benefit, for our happiness and welfare, Caesar Augustus, Father of his own Fatherland, divine Rome, Zeus Paternal, and Savior of the whole human race, in whom Providence has not only fulfilled but even surpassed the prayers of all men: land and sea are at peace, cities

³¹ Frederick C. Grant, ed., *Ancient Roman Religion*, 175.

³² Frederick C. Grant, ed., *Ancient Roman Religion*, 174.

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flourish under the reign of law, in mutual harmony and prosperity; each is at the very acme of fortune and abounding in wealth; all mankind is filled with glad hopes for the future, and with contentment over the present; [it is fitting to honor the god] with public games and with statues, with sacrifices and with hymns.³³

I have cited the above at length to illustrate the context in which Christians experienced their faith. Pre-Nicene Christianity represented a dissenting voice within the Roman imperial world. And for a couple of generations after Nicene Council (325), until the Edict of Thessalonica (380), it is fair to say that Nicene Christianity offered a dissenting voice within the Roman imperial world; but within the Persian imperial world, Nicene Christianity continued to offer a dissenting voice even until today. “In the first century C. E. Rome provided the good news for the world. This was the ‘gospel’ people were accustomed to hearing and upon which they relied.”³⁴ However, the Christian community had gone against the cultural and political grain by declaring Jesus as the intrinsic gospel which subverted the idea of the gospel defined by the followers Imperial Cult.³⁵ The emperors promised a gospel of peace, harmony and prosperity through allegiance to the emperor, Christianity had inherited from Saint Paul the idea of the “gospel that challenged imperial claims and honored those whom the empire consistently dishonored.”³⁶

Constantine’s inculturated or contextualized interpretation of the Christian faith deliberately drew upon Zoroastrian traditions. This is evident in his letter to the King of Persia after 324: “I participate in the light of truth. Led by the light of truth I recognize the divine faith.”³⁷ According to Timothy Barnes, Constantine would “cast . . . a long shadow over all the subsequent history of Christian churches everywhere in the world up to the present day.”³⁸ Barnes observes that

Constantine was proclaimed emperor in 306 and rose to supreme power in an ideological milieu in which emperors were regarded by all as supreme arbiters over all matters terrestrial, including the Christian Church, and it was only during the course of the fourth century that it became possible for Christians to argue that ecclesiastical affairs lay outside the jurisdiction of a Roman emperor.³⁹

However, Barnes made an hasty conclusion for even after the Edict of Milan in

³³ Grant, ed., *Ancient Roman Religion*, 174–175.

³⁴ Arthur J. Dewey, “Competing Gospels: Imperial Echoes, A Dissident Voice,” 64.

³⁵ Dewey, “Competing Gospels,” 64.

³⁶ Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, “Preface,” xii.

³⁷ Cited in Bardill, *Constantine*, 103; citing Theodorus Preger, *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum* (Lipsiae: B. G. Teubner, 1901), 17.

³⁸ Timothy D. Barnes, “Emperors and Bishops of Constantinople (324–431),” 175.

³⁹ Barnes, “Emperors and Bishops,” 175–176.

313, Christians did consider any Emperor to be a rightful arbiter over the Church. Certainly, non-Christians in those empires would assume that the Emperors were “supreme arbiters over all matters terrestrial,” including religious matters. But Christians uniformly contested that claim.

Yet with the emperor perceiving himself as partaking in “the light of truth” through the lens of Christian faith, Christianity wielded a potent political weapon. Pagan polytheistic religions had long used the imperial power to fortify and legitimize themselves as official religions. They often turned this power against Christians, portraying them as exclusive monotheistic dissenters who sought to undermine traditional deities and the Imperial Cult, which Christians labelled “malevolent demons”.⁴⁰ The Christian exclusive monotheistic approach was viewed as perilous, with the potential to unravel the *pax deorum* (Latin: ‘peace of the gods’), the belief that guaranteed Roman harmony, peace, and prosperity.⁴¹ With imperial backing, Christianity could now establish and legitimise itself as the imperial religion.

The only challenge was that Christianity has always carried an inherent rationalistic spirituality, derived from Christ—an intellectual dissenter within the Jewish religious tradition — and in many ways legitimised by Hellenistic culture. Although some scholars — such as John Zizioulas who takes the perspective of the Eastern Church — argue otherwise, the Nicene Creed, in reality, has no Platonic undertones. Church historians have noted how words like *hypostasis* and *ousia* were borrowed from key terms in Platonism.⁴² Hence, some African theologians have called for de-Hellenizing Christian theology. For example, Jesse Mugambi argues “The notion of ‘persons’ in the Trinity should be discarded because in the African mind they are misleading, vague, and confusing.” While the technical Trinitarian language of Nicene faith made sense in the world then, today “most Africans are not acquainted with Greek philosophy.”⁴³ Mugambi is not alone in this struggle. Among others, Millard Erickson has registered concern about the intelligibility of the Hellenistic language of Nicene faith. Erickson argues,

the formula was worked out quite definitely in the fourth century. God is one substance or essence, existing in three persons. The difficulty is that we do not know exactly what these terms mean. We know that the doctrine states that God is three in some respect and one in some other respect, but we do not know precisely what those two different respects

⁴⁰ Bryant, Review of *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, 88.

⁴¹ Bryant, Review of *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, 88.

⁴² John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*; see “Introduction,” 15–26.

⁴³ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 75.

are.⁴⁴

As also noted in the editorial introducing this issue of *African Christian Theology*,⁴⁵ Robert Louis Wilken offers a helpful corrective:

The notion that the development of early Christian thought represented a hellenization of Christianity has outlived its usefulness. . . . a more apt expression would be the *Christianization of Hellenism*, though that phrase does not capture the originality of Christian thought nor the debt owed to Jewish ways of thinking and to the Jewish Bible. Neither does it acknowledge the good and right qualities of Hellenic thinking that Christians recognize as valuable, for example, moral life understood in terms of the virtues. At the same time, one observes again and again that Christian thinking, while working within matters of thought and conceptions rooted in Greco-Roman culture, transformed them so profoundly that in the end something quite new came into being.⁴⁶

Wilken argues for the *Christianization of Hellenism*, suggesting an intellectual integration of Greek philosophical concepts into Christianity. In Africa, scholars tend to see *Christianization* as an organic missiological process by which Christianity becomes a mode of thinking and way of life for the majority of people in a specific context. For instance, Zambia's population is 95% Christian, meaning the nation is a Christianized nation. This phenomenon is not necessarily linked to a particular theological outlook or critical contextualisation or inculturation. Rather, it represents a fundamental organic inculturation wherein Christian thinking, in various forms, dominates the nation's cultural and intellectual landscape.

Hence, African theologians such as Kwame Bediako prefer the term "Africanisation" to describe an open-ended intellectual engagement with *evolving intent*. Africanization posits that what African Christians aim to achieve with Christianity should shape or determine their interpretation of the truth and their actions. In other words, their conception of the truth and actions should focus on intentional consequences, both anticipated and unanticipated. These consequences, in turn, influence the aims of Africanization, making it a dynamic and responsive process. Bediako observes, "following the 'Christianisation' of African tradition, African Christianity must achieve an *Africanisation* of its Christian experience, and this latter may well prove to be the more demanding task."⁴⁷ He stressed:

⁴⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity*, 19.

⁴⁵ See pp. 145–146 of this issue.

⁴⁶ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, xvi–xvii.

⁴⁷ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a non-Western Religion*, 4, emphasis original.

Editorial: The Echo of Nicene Faith: A Decolonial Pentecostal Back-gaze

If the Christianising of African tradition may be considered to have been largely concerned with resolving a basically *religious* problem — in that it had to do with making room in the African experience of religious powers for Christ and the salvation he brings — the Africanising of Christian experience can be seen as being concerned with resolving an essentially *intellectual* problem — how African Christianity, employing Christian tools, may set about mending the torn fabric of African identity and hopefully point a way towards the emergence of a fuller and unfettered African humanity and personality.⁴⁸

For many African theologians, the idea of Hellenization resonates with Africanization as a deliberate and intentional intellectual process of integrating Christian faith within specific African contexts. Both approaches emphasize the importance of kenotic thinking — self-emptying and with humility — in contextualizing and incarnating Christianity to be relevant and accessible within the cultural and intellectual frameworks of the people. Africanization, like Hellenization, therefore, involves a thoughtful engagement with local traditions, values, and worldviews to create a faith expression that is both authentic and relevant to the African experience. Andrew Mbuvi, for example, underlines:

by relating the God of Jesus to the ‘unknown god,’ Paul universalizes the otherwise Jewish and local Palestinian God. Just like the Gospel of John would eventually Hellenize Jesus by interpreting his Jewish identity of Messiah into the Hellenistic notion of Logos (Jn 1:1-4), Paul converts the Jewish God into a transcendent God beyond the confines of the Judeo-Christian religion. The African reality also includes the presence of such a God with the accepted attribute of unknowability — the ‘*mysterium tremendum*.’ God was simply awaiting revelation to be discovered and embraced by the African.⁴⁹

To return to the point, “Platonism is part of the vital Christian theology,” as William Inge observes:

The Galilean Gospel, as it proceeded from the lips of Christ, was doubtless unaffected by Greek philosophy; it was essentially the consummation of the Jewish prophetic religion. But the Catholic Church from its very beginning was formed by a confluence of Jewish and Hellenic religious ideas, and it would not be wholly untrue to say that in religion as in other things *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* [Latin: ‘In being conquered, Greece herself conquered her ferocious conqueror’]. Catholicism . . . is the last creative achievement of classical culture.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 4, emphasis original.

⁴⁹ Andrew M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: Unmasking Embedded Racism and Colonialism in Biblical Studies*, 123.

⁵⁰ William Ralph Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 12, 14.

This argument is also confirmed by other church historians and historical theologians⁵¹ such as Will Durant:

Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it. The Greek mind, dying, came to a transmigrated life in the theology and liturgy of the Church; the Greek language, having reigned for centuries over philosophy, became the vehicle of Christian literature and ritual; the Greek mysteries passed down into the impressive mystery of the Mass. Other pagan cultures contributed to the syncretist result. From Egypt came the ideas of a divine trinity, the last judgment, and a personal immortality of the reward and punishment; from Egypt the adoration of the Mother and the Child, and the mystic theosophy that made Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, and obscured the Christian creed; there, too, Christian monasticism would find its exemplar and its source . . . Christianity was the last great creation of the ancient pagan world.⁵²

Many arguments can be offered as to whether Egyptian traditional religion-philosophy had the idea of Trinity.⁵³ However, one might argue that these so-called pagan ideas, which serve as the embryonic revelation of God in every culture, always find their consummation in the revelation of Jesus Christ. The uniqueness of Christian faith lies in its capacity to creatively redeem cultural minds and ideas which continually offer opportunities for the ongoing formulation of Christian apprehension and experience of divine reality. In exchange, Christianity bestows upon these worldviews and ideas a transcendent value as they included as part of the reconciled reality in Christ. Therefore, as Jens Zimmermann argues, the incarnation of Christ has two important consequences for a Christian view of culture:

The first is that the love displayed in Christ toward the world is the culmination and fulfilment of every philosophy and morality. The best

⁵¹ See especially Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Encounter with Hellenism*; Pelikan, *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint*; Wendy E. Helleman, "The 'Triumph' of Hellenization in Early Christianity;" Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture;" and Walls, "Culture and Coherence in Christian History."

⁵² Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from Their Beginnings to AD. 325, 595*. See also Norman Kretzmann, "Reason and Mystery."

⁵³ The closest non-Christian traditional expression of *trinity* comes from India, from the Vedanta category of *saccidānanda*, a compound form of three Sanskrit words, *Sat* (being), *Cit* (intelligence or consciousness), and *Ānanda* (bliss); as a single term, its first known extant usage appears in *Tejobindu Upanishad*, which scholars guess was composed at sometime between 100 BC and AD 300, though it draws on older Upanishads dating between 800–600 BC. See S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*; Timothy C. Tennent, *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations: The Legacy of Brahmabāndhav Upādhyāy*; and P. V. Joseph, *An Indian Trinitarian Theology of Missio Dei: Insights from St Augustine and Brahmabandhab Uadhyay*.

in other religions and natural virtues will always point toward what is most meaningful and rational. Yet the Christian belief in the cosmic importance of the incarnation postulates that the determining centre of any such insight is God's love as revealed in Christ.⁵⁴

Christ is the ontological locus of the synthesis of all things, including ideas and ways of life, for all human search for meaning is ultimately a search for the purpose of life. Whatever is ultimate in the human pursuit of knowledge across all fields of inquiry and within the religious and philosophical universe of every culture and worldview, "at least in intention, is Christ."⁵⁵ Everything, including cultures and philosophies, must redemptively return to Christ and be resourced for promoting the fullness of life for all things in Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer stresses, God's reality revealed in Christ points to the lordship of Jesus Christ over all things in creation.⁵⁶ For Kwame Bediako, the revelation of Jesus Christ "is nothing less than the comprehensive divine providential plan designed by God from the very beginning of human history to rescue, redeem and remake human existence and to conform it to his own original intention for humanity."⁵⁷

It is important, however, to underline that the Christianity that emerged within Judaism was more an orthopraxy than an orthodoxy. It evolved through an emphasis on "the right action" as the foundation for "right belief." Thus, Judaism was not the source of Christianity's emphasis on intellectual spirituality. In the early days of Christianity, the followers of Jesus were profoundly impacted by his teachings, ministry, and especially the event of his resurrection. These experiences were so significant and transformative that they necessitated a deep and reflective process to understand their meaning. The early Christians had to interpret what these events meant for their faith and how to communicate these ideas to others. One can only imagine the intense theological chaos of this period, as believers grappled with reconciling their new experience with existing beliefs and practices. Given the dramatic nature of these events, there was a strong drive to establish a coherent understanding and to spread these new insights to others. The environment was highly competitive, with various groups and individuals striving to assert their interpretations as the authentic and authoritative understanding of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This competition added to the volatility of the early Christian context, making it a dynamic and sometimes eruptively contentious period of theological development.⁵⁸ Young notes that "There was a proper and fruitful marriage of

⁵⁴ Jens Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism: A Philosophy of Culture for the Church in the World*, 266.

⁵⁵ Kwame Bediako, "The Unique Christ in the Plurality of Religions," 54.

⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 173.

⁵⁷ Kwame Bediako, "What is the Gospel?," 4.

⁵⁸ Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 1.

Greek philosophy and Jewish traditions which produced the new thing, Christianity, which defined itself over against both its parents while inheriting many characteristics from each.”⁵⁹ This also means that Christianity from the beginning was constantly fractured within by its numerous dissenting theological imaginations.

Thus, persecution and dissenting theological views evolved together throughout the history of Christianity. At the heart of Christianity was always a faithful search for truth in order to engage the world rationally, humanely and life-giving through Christ our Lord. This moral responsibility remains a miraculous heritage of Christian faith, and one that demands that “any who would identify with the Christian community and claim allegiance to the Word made flesh”⁶⁰ must engage in the intellectual spirituality of life-giving and social transformation. This arises from the conviction that to know the truth that sets the world free (John 8:32) demands a spirituality which does not just blindly obey unexamined beliefs and practices, but interrogates them rationally with integrity and a genuine desire understand the truth, radically translating that truth into everyday praxiological wisdom so that human beings and the world may become like Jesus Christ.⁶¹ Indeed, this intellectual spirituality that engendered the scientific mind and science re-embedded the human mind into its material substrate.

The intellectual spirituality of Christianity was its radical form of contemplative worship, which continues to echo in time and space. In fact, the first Christian apologetics arose as a response to non-Christian religious and philosophical attacks in the Greco-Roman world that perceived Christianity as less profitable for the wellbeing of society. Quadratus of Athens (c. 125) was the first to write a defence of Christian faith to Emperor Hadrian. Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165) defended the morality of the Christian life in the context of the persecution of Christians by providing an ethical and philosophical basis to convince the devout (pious) Emperor Antoninus Pius (138–161) and the Roman Senate.⁶² He sought to demonstrate to them the unreasonableness of non-

⁵⁹ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, xvi.

⁶⁰ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 107.

⁶¹ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 107.

⁶² See Thomas B. Falls, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*; Wendy E. Helleman, ed. *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World*; Thomas B. Falls, “Justin Martyr and the Logos: An Apologetical Strategy;” Ragnar Holte, “Logos Spermatikos’, Christianity and Ancient Philosophy according to St. Justin’s Apologies;” Wendy Elgersma Helleman, “Justin Martyr and Kwame Bediako Reflections on the Cultural Context of Christianity;” L. W. Bamard, “Justin Martyr in Recent Study;” Leslie William Barnard, trans., *St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies*; Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*.

Christian accusers and the reasonableness of Christianity and Christians. He reached out, stating:

What, then, can all this mean? Although, in our case, we promise to do no evil, and to hold no such atheistic opinions, you do not investigate the charges made against us. Instead, led by unreasonable passion and at the instigation of wicked demons, you punish us inconsiderately without trial.⁶³

He argued that the things that the opponents of Christianity were promoting were not only among the Greeks

through Socrates condemned by reason (*logos*), but also among non-Hellenistic peoples by the Logos Himself, who assumed a human form and became man, and was called Jesus Christ. Through our belief in Him we not only deny that they who did these things are good deities [*diamonas*], but claim that they are evil and ungodly demons, whose actions should not be compared with those of virtue-seeking men.⁶⁴

These apologists believed that to help non-Christians to know the true nature of the Christian faith, it was imperative for the emperors to be enlightened that the allegations against the Christian faith had no factual grounds.⁶⁵ Thus, Christian intellectuals perceived apologetic writings as acts of contemplative prayers and spiritual warfare against forces of darkness that sought to define and determine Christian destiny.

Therefore, the theological state of the church that emerged from persecution was not only radically diverse but also chaotic.⁶⁶ Intense religious competition existed with Roman polytheism, and potentially with Judaism and Islam, alongside significant theological disagreements within Christianity itself. At the time, it was a winner-takes-all scenario. Consequently, Christianity could easily have interpreted Constantine's political victory as divine providence and perceive itself as the victor and embark on a mission to systematically eliminate dissenting theological perspectives and non-Christian religious systems. Bishop of Caesarea's theo-imperial vision which he articulated in *Eusebius: Life of Constantine and In Praise of Constantine* (Eusebius's *Tricennial Orations*) promoted a form of destructive fulfilment theology which he framed through empire theology of divine providence.⁶⁷ Erik Peterson observes, "It is true that

⁶³ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* 5, in *The First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy or The Rule of God*, 37.

⁶⁴ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* 5, p. 38.

⁶⁵ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 1.

⁶⁶ David T. Ngong, *Theology as Construction of Piety: An African Perspective*; see chapter 2: "Providence and the Triumph of Orthodoxy."

⁶⁷ For a detailed treatment of this subject, see Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*; and H. A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine: A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations*.

Eusebius's arguments in the *Proof of the Gospel* are in the service of the biblical demonstration of Christian Doctrine.⁶⁸ But when Eusebius now says, 'This all came to pass, once the Romans possessed the sovereignty, from the days of the coming of our Savior up to the present,' this makes it clear that he has a special interest in the present in the political present of the Roman hegemony.⁶⁹ Eusebius had also argued "that the Sacred Scriptures have predicted a sign for the coming of Christ: Peace, the cessation of political pluralism in the form of nation-states, the rejection of demonic, polytheistic worship of idols and the pious knowledge that there is only *one* creator God over all men."⁷⁰ Peterson comments, "In principal, monotheism had begun with the monarchy of Augustus. Monotheism is the metaphysical corollary of the Roman Empire, which dissolves nationalities."⁷¹ Eusebius saw the monarchy as "a gift of the Logos to men, is the political counterpart to monotheism."⁷² What began in principle with *Augustus* (Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus *aka* Gaius Octavius *aka* Octavian; 63 BC – AD 14; 27 BC – AD 14), has become a reality under Constantine. When Constantine defeated Licinius, imperial monarchy was reestablished, and simultaneously, the Monarchy of God was solidified.⁷³

According to Eusebius, Constantine "had brought under his control one Roman Empire united as of old, the first to proclaim to all the monarchy of God, and by monarchy himself directing the whole of life under Roman rule."⁷⁴ Eusebius maintained:

two great powers — the Roman Empire, which became a monarchy at that time, and the teaching of Christ — proceeding as if from a single starting point, at once tamed and reconciled all to friendship. Thus, each blossomed at the same time and place as the other . . . For while the power of Our Savior destroyed the polyarchy and polytheism of the demons and heralded the one kingdom of God to Greeks and barbarians and all men to the farthest extent of the earth, the Roman Empire, now that the causes of the manifold governments had been abolished, subdued the visible governments, in order to merge the entire race into one unity and concord. Already it has united most of the various peoples, and it is further destined to obtain all those not yet united, right up to the very limits of the inhabited world.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Erik Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire," 94.

⁶⁹ Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," 94.

⁷⁰ Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," 94.

⁷¹ Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," 94.

⁷² Drake, *In Praise of Constantine*, 32.

⁷³ Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 68.

⁷⁴ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 102.

⁷⁵ Eusebius, "On Christ's Sepulchre" 16.5–6; in Drake, *In Praise of Constantine*, 120.

The Roman Empire came to be regarded as “an ‘imitation’ of the heavenly kingdom,” encapsulated in the Nicene monotheistic formula “the *one* God and the *one* Emperor.”⁷⁶ The imperial ideology of Eusebius “has been criticized as instinctively problematic.”⁷⁷ However, Eusebius’ “theo-political vision” and *Ecclesiastical History* had dominated interpretations of early Christianity in both Eastern and Western traditions. Through “the one God and one Emperor” motif, Eusebius envisioned Christianity as a global community, a new nation “that would bring all nations into its orbit.”⁷⁸ His influence has been profound throughout history, shaping Christian culture, political imaginations and becoming a contested territory through continual reevaluations, reconstructions, and recontestations over nearly two millennia.⁷⁹ As Peterson claims, Eusebius, without critical qualification, underlined scriptural “prophetic predictions of the peace among the nations as being fulfilled in the Roman Empire. . . . What we are hearing is the voice not of a scholar but of a political propagandist.”⁸⁰ Eusebius’ imperial ideology integrated Christian critique of polytheism with the sovereignty of the Roman Emperor and the Nicene Monotheism (One God, the Creator). As Peterson demonstrates, for Eusebius:

National sovereignty is allied intimately with polytheism, with the effect that the Roman Empire is then pressed into service in the struggle against polytheism. War is attributed either to demons or to the fatalism of polytheistic nationalism . . . while Christianity presents itself in contrast as supportive of the peace policy of the Roman Empire. The three concepts: Roman Empire, peace, and monotheism, are thus inextricably linked with one another. But now a fourth impetus intrudes: the monarchy of the Roman Emperor. The *one* monarch on earth —and for Eusebius that can only be Constantine —corresponds to the *one* divine monarch in heaven. Despite the influence of ancient philosophy and rhetoric on Eusebius, there should be no mistake that the whole conception linking empire, peace, monotheism, and monarchy consists of a unity fashioned by Christians.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 187.

⁷⁷ James W. Haring, “‘The Lord Your God is God of Gods and Lord of Lords’: Is Monotheism a Political Problem in the Hebrew Bible?,” 512.

⁷⁸ Michael Hollerich, *Making Christian History: Eusebius of Caesarea and His Readers*, 47. Hollerich also gives a detailed treatise of Eusebius’ “theo-political vision” and *Ecclesiastical History*.

⁷⁹ See Hollerich, *Making Christian History*.

⁸⁰ Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem,” 94–95. See also Brian E. Daley, “‘One Thing and Another’: The Persons in God and the Person of Christ in Patristic Theology,” 45.

⁸¹ Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem,” 96.

James Haring cautions that scholars should refrain from hastily using Eusebius as a convenient symbol of a detrimental “Constantinianism.”⁸² However, it is also true that Eusebius’s impact through writing what the majority were thinking and saying will always remain an existential gap in history — an indelible mark at the of the history of Christianity and an ever-fresh wound that reminds how one person’s ideas can adversely affect many people.

However, in many ways Eusebius’s testimony approach helps us to hear an *echo of Nicene faith*, that the Creed as a historical document shaped by, and fundamentally responding to, the existential questions and needs of the Roman Empire’s cultural context, continues to reverberate within contemporary spiritual practices and beliefs — though in radically transformed ways. While the Creed’s core theological affirmations remain significant, their delineations, interpretations, and the existential realities they engage as resources for faith have been reconfigured in light of distinct contexts and spiritual sensibilities. Like all theological concepts, these affirmations are inherently plastic, always requiring fresh interpretation to remain theologically and existentially adequate to the mission statement of Jesus: “*I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly*” (John 10:10). Christianity as it emerged from the Nicene formulations within the Roman Empire did not remain a static religious movement; rather, it undertook necessary incarnational shifts and contextual adjustments to remain accessible, relevant, and authentically universal. In this regard, African pentecostalism’s post-Nicene spirituality represents one such incarnational recalibration — embodying the ongoing negotiation between inherited creedal frameworks and Spirit-led, lived belief-practices. It is through these processes of reinterpretation and contextual rearticulation that the Nicene faith continues to find new life within diverse contemporary settings.⁸³

However, the Nicene Creed as unifying and identity shaping spiritual resources made Christian became a powerful socio-political and cultural force, striving to harmonize and counter dissenting voices within Imperial Rome. In the aftermath, Christianity emerged in a dual form: on the one hand, *an empire Christianity* radically transformed in its expression through institutional consolidation, doctrinal standardization, and cultural establishment; and on the other hand, *a Christianity of empire*, appropriated and utilized by imperial power as an instrument of legitimacy, unity, and governance. Joerg Rieger defines “empire” as a political, social, and economic undertaking characterized by a “massive concentration of power that permeates all aspects of life and which

⁸² Haring, “The Lord Your God is God of Gods and Lord of Lords,” 515.

⁸³ The focus of this essay is on the Roman empire. I am aware that the Roman Empire was only one of the monarchical contexts in which Early Christianity thrived and spread. There were others such as the Parthian Empire, which was followed by the Sassanid Persian Empire, the Aksumite Empire, the smaller βασιλείας (*basileías*, ‘kingdoms’) of Nubia, Armenia, and Georgia.

cannot be controlled by one factor alone, and it seeks to extend its control as far as possible.”⁸⁴ Nicene faith discourse would acquire the characteristics of an imperial religion, exhibiting “strong tendencies to domesticate Christ and anything else that poses a challenge to its powers.”⁸⁵

In a decolonial Pentecostal *back-gaze*, the Nicene Creed serves as both the *prologue* and *kernel* of the irreducible mystery of Christian faith. This mystery, inherently complex and profound, resonates and echoes across time and space, balancing a unique tension of being both familiar and unfamiliar within every human cultural context. What is important, however, it is not merely the echo but the various distinctive ways the echo is heard and interpreted. As the prologue, the Creed introduces foundational beliefs and invites believers into the rich, enigmatic spiritual resources of Christianity.⁸⁶ As the kernel, it distils the most vital and essential truths of the faith into a concise yet profound form. These foundational beliefs connect with deep, existential aspects of human life, making them both explainable and mysterious, relatable yet elusive, across different cultures and historical periods.⁸⁷ This universal accessibility and applicability underscore the enduring power and openness of the Creed, allowing diverse explanations, interpretations, and approaches in Christianity’s ongoing *ressourcement* of it as a tool for addressing the fundamental questions of meaning, purpose, and existence intrinsic to the human experience. The Creed is “a treasure chest, waiting to be opened and explored.”⁸⁸ It was never intended to reduce faith to simple facts or “to drive away mystery and complexity. Rather, the creeds secure a framework for the whole of our faith, so that we can freely go and explore the riches of the mystery in each part and in the whole. Every line and phrase contain within it an astonishing ‘world’ to explore.”⁸⁹ Thus, although the language of, and indeed the very concept of, the “Creed” itself in African Pentecostalism is often perceived with suspicion as ritualistic, restrictive, and reflective of a Nicene formulation that appears fundamentally obsolete or fossilized, the dynamic seed of natality — the ability to begin anew in each context — means that the spirituality the Creed embodied will never become a fossil but will continue as a living and dynamic reality.⁹⁰ Through rigorous reflection, it perennially gives birth to new theological imaginations. This inherent natality ensures that Christianity in every place and

⁸⁴ Joerg Rieger, “Christian Theology and Empires,” 1–4.

⁸⁵ Rieger, “Christian Theology and Empires,” 3.

⁸⁶ See Thomas C. Ferguson, *The Past is Prologue: The Revolution of Nicene Historiography*.

⁸⁷ See Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*.

⁸⁸ Jared Ortiz and Daniel Keating, *The Nicene Creed: A Scriptural, Historical, and Theological Commentary*, 3.

⁸⁹ Ortiz and Keating, *The Nicene Creed*, 3.

⁹⁰ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 107.

culture remains relevant and responsive to the evolving human experience, allowing it to adapt and flourish across diverse cultural landscapes.

The (Pre)Nicene Christian Shadow

Comparably, the intense religious competition of pre-Nicene Christianity is echoed in contemporary Africa; in fact, it fundamentally characterizes Christianity in the Global South. Philip Jenkins describes this context as being marked by “competing claims to faith.”⁹¹ In many African countries, Christianity is practiced amid a variety of religions and is deeply entrenched in diverse and often irreconcilable theological perspectives that coexist in both creative and destructive tension. Jenkins observes, “For better or worse, the dominant churches of the future could have much in common with those of medieval or early modern European times.”⁹² Lamin Sanneh notes:

An impressive picture now meets our eyes: the exploding numbers, the scope of the phenomenon, the cross-cultural patterns of encounter, the variety and diversity of cultures affected, the structural and antistructural nature of the changes involved, the shifting *couleur locale* that manifests itself in unorthodox variations on the canon, the wide spectrum of theological views and ecclesiastical traditions represented, the ideas of authority and styles of leadership that has been developed, the process of acute indigenization that fosters liturgical renewal, the duplication of forms in a rapidly changing world of experimentation and adaption, and the production of new religious art, music, hymns, songs, and prayers. All of these are featured on Christianity’s breathtakingly diverse face today.⁹³

Just as during Emperor Constantine’s time, when Christianity maintained its distinctiveness yet had its future shaped by the cultural framework of the Roman Empire, today, according to numerous scholars of World Christianity and/or Pentecostalism such as Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Philip Jenkins, Peter Phan, Harvey Cox, Nimi Wariboko, Amos Yong, Allan Anderson, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and many others, the future of Christianity is being shaped and influenced by the cultural assumptions of the non-Western world.⁹⁴ This

⁹¹ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global*, 5.

⁹² Philip Jenkins, “Believing in the Global South.”

⁹³ Lamin Sanneh, “Introduction: The Changing Face of Christianity: The Cultural Impetus of a World Religion,” 4.

⁹⁴ For the studies on World Christianity and African Christianity in general see John Vernon Taylor, *Growth of the Church in Buganda: An Attempt at Understanding*; Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*; Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith*; Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*; Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity*; Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*; Peter C. Phan, “World Christianity: Its

confirms James Russell's hypothesis: "If a universal religion is to succeed in making inroads to a folk-religious society which does not desire salvation, it must temporarily accommodate the predominantly world-accepting ethos and worldview of that society."⁹⁵ African pentecostalism replicates both the growth and the spiritual chaos of the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire Christianity.⁹⁶ Scholars have underlined that primal worldviews are "the common font of inheritance or environmental air that African Pentecostals breathe,"⁹⁷ thereby reproducing a recognizable character and reclaiming the pneumatic and charismatic religiosity that existed in traditional society.⁹⁸ Sanneh observes,

More languages and idioms are used in reading the Christian scriptures and in Christian liturgy, devotion, worship, and prayer than in any other religion. The unity of Christianity, however it's defined, has not been at the expense of the diversity and variety of cultural idioms and of models of faith and practice in use at any time and any church tradition. Christianity today is not just a changing face; its leadership and personalities, [theological and epistemological assumptions] are changing.⁹⁹

The contemporary non-Western Nicene imperative is not driven by an emperor's concern and desire for the unity and harmony of the empire. Instead,

Implications for History, Religious Studies, and Theology;" Dana L. Robert, "Forty Years of North American Missiology: A Brief Review;" Douglas Jacobsen, *Global Gospel: An Introduction to Christianity on Five Continents*; and Douglas Jacobsen, *What is Christianity?*

For the studies in *World Pentecostalism*, see, for example, Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*; Karla Poewe, ed., *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*; Allan H. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*; Amos Yong and Clifton Clarke, eds., *Global Renewal, Religious Pluralism, and the Great Commission: Toward a Renewal Theology of Mission and Interreligious Encounter*.

Specifically on *African Pentecostal* scholarship, see Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*; Allan H. Anderson, *Spirit-Filled World: Religious Discontinuity in African Pentecostalism* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018); J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*; Martin Lindhardt, ed., *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*.

⁹⁵ James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation*, 102–103.

⁹⁶ Klaus Nurnberger has made this observation from a South African context. See his *Prosperity Poverty and Pollution: Managing the Approaching Crisis*.

⁹⁷ Nimi Wariboko, *The Split God: Pentecostalism and Critical Theory*, 47.

⁹⁸ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 186. See also Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism*; J. Kwabena, Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics*; E. Kingsley Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*; and Paul Gifford, "The Primal Pentecostal Imagination: Variants, Origins and Importance."

⁹⁹ Sanneh, "Introduction," 5.

it is motivated by the new human existential yearning and desire for the flourishing of humanity and all things.

In reflecting Christianity “from below,” pentecostalism now considers the Bible an African sacred text, interpreting it through an African indigenous lens. Scholars from across church traditions such as Mercy Oduyoye, Musa Wenkosi Dube, Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, Teresa Okure, Byang Kato, Elizabeth W. Mburu, Tokunboh Adeyemo, Isabel A. Phiri, John S. Mbiti, Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Tinyiko Maluleke, Madipoane Masenya, Kwame Bediako, and many others highlight that once the Bible was translated into African languages, it instantly shifted from an imperial or colonial text to an anti-colonial and liberationist text. It then evolved into a postcolonial and anti-neo-colonial text, subsequently becoming a text of reconstruction, human rights, gender justice, public health, and ecological concerns, as well as the primary source of spiritual epistemology for human flourishing.¹⁰⁰ This ongoing appropriation reflects the dynamic and multifaceted ways Africans engage with the Bible and the Spirit, could be rightly described as Bible people.¹⁰¹ African Christians have an absolute love for the Bible, and are at home in the Bible. Some perceive ultimate spiritual power as resides in the Bible that they place it under their pillows at night as an act of faith in the God. They have “direct and unmitigated access to the Bible,

¹⁰⁰ See David T. Adamo, *Reading and Interpreting the Bible in African Indigenous Churches*; E. O. Babalola, “Phenomenon of African Christianity Vis-a-Vis Adoption of the Bible and Cultural Awareness in Nigeria;” Gerald O. West, “Bible in African Christianity: South African Black Theology;” West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*; Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*; Gillian M. Bediako, *Primal Religion and the Bible: William Robertson Smith and His Heritage*; H. W. Kinoti and John Mary Waliggo, eds., *The Bible in African Christianity: Essays in Biblical theology*; John S. Pobee and Barbel von Wartenberg-Potter, eds., *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*; John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*; John S. Mbiti, “The Role of The Jewish Bible in African Independent Churches;” Kwame Bediako, “Biblical Exegesis in Africa: The Significance of the Translated Scriptures;” Lamin Sanneh, “Translations of the Bible and the Cultural Impulse;” Lovemore Togarasei, “Bible and Theology in Africa;” Musa Dube, “Gender and The Bible in African Christianity;” Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*; Paul Gifford, “The Bible in Africa: A Novel Usage in Africa’s New Churches;” Gifford, “The ritual Use of the Bible in African Pentecostalism;” Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1st edition (2006); Yacouba Sanon, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Nathan Chiroma, eds., *Africa Bible Commentary*, 2nd edition (2025); Ukachukwu Chris Manus, “The Bible in African Christianity;” and Zephania Shila Nkesela, *A Maasai Encounter with the Bible: Nomadic Lifestyle as a Hermeneutic Question*.

¹⁰¹ For the discussion of the significance of the Bible in African Christianity see, Tinyiko S. Maluleke, “Of Africanised Bees and Africanised Churches: Ten Theses on African Christianity,” 377.

authorised, energised and qualified mainly by the Spirit.”¹⁰² Nimi Wariboko observes,

Pentecostalism has helped to make Christianity an African religion. African pentecostals, like the rest of African Christians, have appropriated the gospel; adapted the faith to their cultural sensibilities, concerns, and agendas; nudged its worldview to properly align with their indigenous maps of the universe; and contextualized its practices. Christianity is a translated religion in Africa. Pentecostals in Africa are reading, interpreting, and understanding the scriptures in their own cultural contexts and engendering domesticated theologies.¹⁰³

Indeed, as Dyron Daughrity rightly observes, African interpreters provide a different perspective, often arriving at conclusions that contrast sharply with Western commentators of the past 200 years, particularly since the “Enlightenment.”¹⁰⁴ The Bible has “entrenched itself in everyday life as a font of meaning and hope.”¹⁰⁵ It has also emerged “as a foundation of community consensus and identity, sometimes as a source of tension with its wider social surroundings, sometimes giving legitimacy to edifices of power and authority, sometimes imparting a resource for liberating impulses.”¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the Bible is often used as explanation for social ills and address postcolonial issues, functioning as a tool to critique or justify failures of the state.¹⁰⁷ “This indigenous domestication” in Christianity in the global south, Sanneh argues, “is comparable in scope and consequences to the Hellenization of theology in the early church, but this time without the state apparatus.”¹⁰⁸ However, it must be noted that the bulk of the Hellenization of theology in the earth church took place *prior* to the involvement of the state apparatus. And even with Nicaea 325, the state apparatus was not involved in the details. There is no such involvement until Constantinople 381, the year after the Edict of Thessalonica.

Thus, politics still play a role in the expression of non-Western Christianity. At the heart of pentecostalism lies a construction of politics as the locus of spiritual warfare, where contests for power over sovereignty and the soul of the

¹⁰² Maluleke, “Of Africanised Bees and Africanised Churches,” 377.

¹⁰³ Nimi Wariboko, “Pentecostalism in Africa.” See also, Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*; and Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.

¹⁰⁴ Dyron B. Daughrity, “Assessing Christianity in Africa’s Transforming Context,” 356; see also Daughrity, *The Changing World of Christianity: The Global History of a Borderless Religion*, 253.

¹⁰⁵ Stephen J. Hunt, “Introduction,” in *The Handbook of Global Contemporary Christianity: Movements, Institutions, and Allegiance*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Hunt, “Introduction,” 1.

¹⁰⁷ See Chammah J. Kaunda, “The Public Bible, Politics, Gender, and Sexuality in Zambia,” and Kaunda, “‘Flood this Nation with the Bible’: Rev. Godfridah Sumali, Politics and the Public (People’s) Bible in Zambia.”

¹⁰⁸ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, 11.

nation unfold.¹⁰⁹ Religious pursuit of political power — regarded as a legitimate spiritual struggle against forces of darkness to secure God’s sovereignty over their lives and nations — is also marked by intense competition, with different religious groups vying for dominance in shaping the political and cultural landscapes of their countries.¹¹⁰ For many Pentecostals, politics left unchecked disrupts life and unleashes dark forces that perpetuate disorder and chaos within the human realm.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, many Pentecostals have ended up uncritically “baptising” and legitimizing authoritarian regimes.¹¹² This competition creates a dynamic environment where religious and political agendas are deeply intertwined, leading to both creative developments and destructive conflicts within these societies. However, these emerging faith claims in the Global South, particularly in Africa, may unveil further truths that remain hidden within the Scriptures. The spiritual reality embodied by the Nicene Creed has always existed, awaiting to be discovered through careful discernment, much like the early Christians did within the Hellenistic culture, but now within the cultural contexts of the Global South.

Decolonial Pentecostalism, understood as a tool or redemptive means for indigenous discovery of the Nicene Creed, is crucial for making sense of the type of theology that is most pertinent and meaningful in decolonizing the minds of African Christians. The Nicene Creed “is a vehicle that could be used to discover God in His hiddenness.”¹¹³ In other words, it serves as “a torch to help us and our directions for knowing, worshipping and adoring our God of Creation and Salvation.”¹¹⁴ The Nicene Creed was never intended to be an end in itself, but rather a process and a passage leading to the door that opens to the theological treasures hidden within creation. The Nicene faith is a journey of enduring (re)discovery, continually uncovering its universality, sometimes in ridiculous and inconceivable ways and through metaphors that appear to outrageously

¹⁰⁹ Nimi Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, 154.

¹¹⁰ See Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*; Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role*; Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*; and Ebenezer Obadare, *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria*.

¹¹¹ See Chammah J. Kaunda, *The Nation That Fears God Prospers: A Critique of Zambian Pentecostal Theopolitical Imaginations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018).

¹¹² Amos Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*, 139, footnote 57.

¹¹³ Sione ‘Amanaki Havea, “The Pacific and Theology in World Perspective,” in *Papauta 1978: South Pacific Consultation on Theological Education January 10–17, 1978*, 63–65 (Suva, Fiji: Lotu Pasifika, 1980), 64; quoted in Seforosa Carroll, “Coconut Theology,” 334. See also Seforosa Carroll, “Jesus through Pacific Eyes.”

¹¹⁴ Carroll, “Coconut Theology,” 334.

contradict normative biblical metaphors; an example of this is Ama'amalele Tofaeono's portrayal of Jesus as "the Pig of God."¹¹⁵

The Church and Spirituality of Empire's Peace and Unity

With a Christian emperor in its arsenal, Christianity gained the imperial power to reposition itself as a formidable religious force. Young notes, Bishops had met in Council before to deal with members of their own number who failed to teach what their consensus demanded. Excommunication had been used before, and false teachers anathematized. The new elements lay in using a creed to define orthodoxy, and in the availability of imperial power to enforce the decisions of the Council and provide the bishops with greater effectiveness in exercising their authority on earth.¹¹⁶

This newfound influence extended beyond political and social status, giving Christianity the ability to discreetly leverage imperial power to address its internal theological fragmentation. This was a context of struggle for the church to fully establish itself as a legitimate cultural system and legitimatizing political instrument of the Roman cultural-political world with articulated systems of beliefs and practices that could be validated uniformly by the church.

In the fourth century, the Roman Empire also faced significant socioeconomic and political pressures, compounded by frequent barbarian invasions from north-western Europe. These challenges necessitated a reorganization of the empire for more effective governance. As a result, the empire was divided into four quadrants, each overseen by a different ruler, to ensure better manageability and defence against external threats.¹¹⁷ When Constantine ascended the throne, he dismantled the tetrarchy approach in favour of a return to monarchical rule. Following the beginning of his conversion to Christianity, he issued an exhortation to the bishops of the churches, emphasizing the importance of unity. He believed that ecclesiastical unity would contribute to overall stability in the empire, aligning religious harmony with political cohesion under his rule.¹¹⁸ Thus, the church was under

¹¹⁵ Tofaeono asks, "Can Jesus symbolically and/or metaphorically be portrayed as a Pig — a 'Perfect Pig' of God?" His answer is an emphatic "yes" as he relates: "If John the Baptist had lived on one of the islands in Oceania 2000 years ago, and had encountered the Christ walking by, he would surely have exclaimed, 'Behold, the Pig of God that takes away the sins of the world'." Ama'amalele Tofaeono, "Behold the Pig of God: Mystery of Christ's Sacrifice in the Context of Melanesia — Oceania," 83 and 98. For a comparison, see the parallel "Lamb of God" biblical text in John 1:29.

¹¹⁶ Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 13.

¹¹⁷ Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World*, 226.

¹¹⁸ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 116.

pressure to convince the emperor that it had the capacity to serve as an imperial medium for “participating in the light of truth” and as the source of social coherence and harmony. To fulfil this role, the church needed to present a unified and coherent system of beliefs and practices. Just before the Council of Nicaea, Emperor Constantine therefore sent a letter to both Arius and Bishop Alexander, reflecting his concern for unity among the churches. This unity was seen as essential not only for religious harmony but also for maintaining the stability and cohesion of the fragile state. The emperor’s involvement underscores the intertwined relationship between ecclesiastical unity and political stability during this period.¹¹⁹ While the formulation of the Nicene Creed was primarily the result of the efforts of the bishops and theologians who were present, Constantine wielded significant political influence during the Council. His vested interests were evident in his fervent desire for ecclesiastical unity, which was intricately linked to his vision of a stable and unified empire. Constantine’s exhortations to the bishops to achieve consensus and unity were driven by his belief that such harmony would foster social and political stability. Although Constantine did not directly pronounce the Nicene Creed, his influence and political motivations undoubtedly shaped the Council’s proceedings and eventual outcome, underscoring the importance of unity for the preservation of imperial stability. Hence, Eusebius after the Nicene Council writes that Constantine wrote to a church at Alexandria: “What the three hundred bishops have decided is nothing else than the decree of God, for the Holy Spirit, present in these men, made known the will of God.”¹²⁰ It is intriguing to consider the Nicene theology through the lens of *imperial harmony*, almost as a theology of unified rule. It encapsulated the concept of a singular standard of belief, a unified ecclesiastical structure, all under the umbrella of a single empire.

The Nicene Creed, with its emphasis on doctrinal unity and orthodoxy, mirrored the imperial aspirations for a cohesive and homogeneous society. In this sense, it can be viewed as not just a doctrinal statement, but also a theology of the political and social objectives of the time, where unity in faith mirrored unity in governance. In this sense, the Nicene theology also carried significant connotations of global colonization and imperialism. The affirmation of “one God as the creator” potentially suggested the concept of a universal empire, where those (divine surrogates) who embodied the knowledge of this singular deity wielded ultimate authority over all aspects of existence. In proclaiming the oneness of God, the Nicene Creed conveyed not only a theological truth but also a vision of global dominion under the divine sovereignty represented by human authority. It addressed the theological queries of its era, necessitating a nuanced

¹¹⁹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 116.

¹²⁰ Karl Baus, Hans-Georg Beck, Eugen Ewig, and Hermann Josef Vogt, *The Imperial Church from Constantine to the Early Middle Age*, 28.

comprehension of the prevailing realities — political, social, and religious. The church found itself repositioning amid a world where it had previously faced persecution. Consequently, its pursuit of truth interpretation undeniably carried political undertones, subtly seeking to assert dominance and consolidate monotheistic control over the Roman world.¹²¹ This theological perspective resonated with the aspirations of imperial power, reinforcing the idea of a unified and expansive empire under the auspices of a singular divine authority. Historians should consider the broader implications of events like the Council on the trajectory of Western civilization and its global expansionist tendencies. The consolidation of religious authority and imperial power during this time may certainly have laid some groundwork for future geopolitical and missionary enterprise ambitions. As could be deduced from Gibbon's view, the influence of Christianity was not confined to the period or the limits of the Roman Empire. He noted, "After a revolution of thirteen or fourteen centuries, that religion is still professed by the nations of Europe . . . By the industry and zeal of the Europeans, it has been widely diffused to the most distant shores of Asia and Africa; and by the means of their colonies has been firmly established from Canada to Chili, in a world unknown to the ancients."¹²²

The Nicene Creed, which in the eyes of Emperor Constantine could be said to have externalized the emperor's divinity, laid a profound foundation for various theological and philosophical principles that extend beyond mere geopolitical imagination and expansion. However, it is safe to say that Emperor Constantine could have easily come to symbolize the theological principles that the Nicene Creed represented, albeit in a complex and not entirely clear-cut manner.¹²³ But the idea of "one God, the creator" also has implications for the contemporary emerging relational view of existence, where all things are interconnected and interdependent. This perspective not only fosters a sense of relatedness among all aspects of creation, but also underscores the inherent dignity and worth of each individual. From this theological framework arise significant ethical implications, including the affirmation of universal human rights, the pursuit of global justice, and the imperative to uphold the integrity of creation. The belief in the oneness of God as the creator serves as a philosophical cornerstone for advocating for the rights and dignity of all people, regardless of differences in culture, religion, or ethnicity. It inspires efforts to create a more just and equitable world where the interconnectedness and value of all life are recognized and respected.

¹²¹ See Hanns Christof Brennecke, "Introduction: Framing the Historical and Theological Problems."

¹²² Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 332.

¹²³ See Papanikolaou and Demacopoulos, "Outrunning Constantine's Shadow."

However, achieving this unity was challenging given the theological diversity and fluidity of the time. It was in this context that anti-Nicene theological views were historically embodied in the Arian controversy that would go down in history as the quintessential heresy.¹²⁴ There has been a historically irreconcilable controversy around Nicene theology and Arian heresy, with everyone writing “as if” they were looking into a dark abyss. Perhaps, we have only emerged with that which seems to have *gazed back* at us. It appears the truth remains buried in the very heart of this concealing abyss. Indeed, the history of the origins of the Nicene controversy remains challenging to reconstruct due to the destruction of sources, polemical distortions by opponents, and the complex alliances and interchanges shaped by the new political legitimacy of Christians within the Roman Empire.¹²⁵ Rebecca Lyman observes,

Attempts to link Arius’ teaching on the transcendence of the Father to contemporary philosophy (by Rowan Williams), or a populist exemplarism through a created Son (by Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh), or legacies of problems within Origen’s theology have never fully explained the intensity and bitterness of the early debate which first split the Alexandrian church and then attracted powerful outside episcopal allies on both sides.¹²⁶

However, the Nicene Council was not only an ecumenical space for determining a unified system of beliefs, but also an historical site of embodying the seed that perennially germinates various theological tenants and will always be a dynamic site of theologizing all forms of existences. However, this period was also rife with ideological and power struggles. Papanikolaou and Demacopoulos argue:

One might be more sympathetic to the charge of “Constantinianism” if it pointed to the kinds of possibilities opened to the Christian Church as a result of Constantine’s conversion, and the kinds of exclusions it enabled. It would be difficult to dispute that after Constantine, the Christian Church suffered from the temptation of using state power to

¹²⁴ For various perspectives on this issue, see, Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*; Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine*; Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*; John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*; David Gwynn, *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of ‘The Arian Controversy’*; Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*; Gwynn, “Reconstructing the Council of Nicaea;” Mark Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*.

¹²⁵ There are various works with different views on this issue. See, e.g., Uta Heil, “The Homoians;” Winrich Löhr, “Arius Reconsidered (Part 1);” Löhr, “Arius Reconsidered (Part 2);” Rebecca Lyman, “Arius and Arianism: The Origins of the Alexandrian Controversy;” Rowan Williams, “Does It Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?,” and Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*.

¹²⁶ Rebecca Lyman, “The Theology of the Council of Nicaea.”

advance what is determined to be Christian objectives, and this temptation plagued the Christian Church even during the formation of the modern nation state. The use of state power ultimately leads to the violent exclusion of not simply those who are not Christian, but those who might interpret Christianity differently. Constantine also opened the door for state power to influence the institutional life of the Christian Church, to the point, as Timothy Barnes has proven, of the election of the archbishop of Constantinople being determined by the will of the emperor, even if the latter did not formally meddle in the official process of electing him.¹²⁷

Some scholars argue that the Arian controversy was not dominant in the fourth-century church.¹²⁸ Moreover, no one self-identified as *Arian* or viewed Arius as the central figure in the debate.¹²⁹ Instead, the term “Arian” may have been coined by Athanasius of Alexandria, who used it to frame his conflicts within the see of Alexandria and the broader empire.¹³⁰ Faced with various disciplinary charges, Athanasius claimed that supporters of the presbyter Arius were systematically attempting to unseat him for doctrinal reasons. By aligning himself with the Creed of Nicaea, Athanasius cast Arius as the archetypal heretic. The Arian controversy and the concept of Arians as a distinct group are thus seen as polemical constructs of Athanasius. However, numerous scholars indicate that “Arianism”, which was initially limited to the Christian community in the city of Alexandria, was a well-spread theological and dogmatic position at the beginning of the fourth century.¹³¹ According to Hanns Brennecke, “It managed to attract numerous adherents from among the Christian clergy, the Roman aristocracy and the imperial court; it infuriated the orthodox leaders of the Christian Church and their imperial supporters; and it was constantly and passionately debated.”¹³² This perspective sparked the so-called Arian controversy several years before Constantine became the sole emperor in 324.

¹²⁷ Papanikolaou and Demacopoulos, “Outrunning Constantine’s Shadow,” 4.

¹²⁸ E.g., Robert Gregg, ed., *Arianism: Historical and Theological Assessments*; Michel Barnes and Daniel H. Williams, eds., *Arianism after Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth Century Trinitarian Conflicts*; Joseph T. Lienhard, *Contra Marcellum: Marcellus of Ancyra and Fourth Century Theology*; and Richard Paul Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution*.

¹²⁹ For a detailed discussion of this Arias controversy, see Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*; Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*; Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*; and Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*; Behr, *The Nicene Faith: Part 1, True God of True God*.

¹³⁰ Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, 24–25.

¹³¹ E.g., see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*.

¹³² See Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*. See also various chapters in Robert C. Gregg, ed., *Arianism*.

Originating in Egypt, the conflict spread to the East and, by the mid-fourth century, had enveloped the entire Christian church within the Roman Empire. The controversy endured for decades until Emperor Theodosius I convened the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381.¹³³ While Athanasius of Alexandria might have had motives for a vigorous attack on the Arians, numerous orthodox bishops also rejected the Arian position. Throughout the fourth and early fifth centuries, they compelled the Arians to continuously rethink and reformulate their doctrinal position. However, scholars caution that Arianism may have “meant different things to different people, and our tendency to approach it as a coherent Christian phenomenon distorts a much more complex and nuanced reality.”¹³⁴ This implies that, while Nicaea and Arianism came to be perceived as opposites, the actual theological landscape was far more nuanced. The simplistic traditional narrative of the Arian controversy fails to capture the complexities of the fourth-century theological climate; instead, it represents a polemical construct that has become deeply entrenched in historical discourse.¹³⁵

Thus, the Nicene space — like all human spaces — was far from neutral; it was charged spiritual contradictions. But God was still in there. The Nicene creed itself was not a neutral construct; rather, it carried profound political implications and wielded revolutionary influence over the socio-political and ecclesiastical landscape of its time. This environment fostered various implicit theologies, such as those concerning political sovereignty and the empire. The Council aimed to silence dissenting voices, often labeling them as anti-Nicene, thereby positioning itself as the authoritative voice of Christian monotheistic orthodoxy. In this politically and spiritually charged atmosphere, the seeds of religious and theological monopoly were sown. The Council’s decisions led to the suppression and eventual annihilation of competing religious views, promoting a monotheistic framework that began to dominate the religious landscape. These developments marked a significant shift in the history of Christianity. The Nicene Creed, born from this politically charged Roman context, became a covert imperial tool not only for theological clarification but also for political and ecclesiastical power consolidation. The Council’s decisions had far-reaching implications, setting a precedent for the intertwining of religious authority with political power. The process of monotheisticization — the drive to establish a single, unified religious truth — began to take hold, influencing the development of Christian doctrine and practice for centuries to come. Therefore, the impact of the Nicene Council extended beyond mere theological disputes; it was a moment of profound transformation in the history

¹³³ Brennecke, “Introduction,” 1.

¹³⁴ Yitzhak Hen, “Conclusion: The Elusive Nature of an Orthodox Heresy,” 311.

¹³⁵ Ferguson, *The Past is Prologue*, 2.

of Christianity. By establishing a standardised set of beliefs, the Council sought to unify the Christian community under a single doctrinal banner. The suppression of dissenting views and the promotion of a unified and dominant orthodoxy were seen as essential for the stability and coherence of the Christian empire. This politically charged environment facilitated the creation of a religious monopoly, silencing dissenting voices and promoting a unified theological framework that aligned with imperial interests.¹³⁶ Even within such a profoundly human arena — marked by political manoeuvring, theological dispute, and imperial ambition — the ultimate victory belonged to God, not because of human achievement, but solely by God's grace. It is not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit that battles, both seen and unseen, are truly won. When one focuses exclusively on the visible, human dimension of history — the personalities, councils, and politics — there is a risk of overlooking the sustaining grace of God at work beneath human frailty. God accomplishes victory even where human efforts falter, and brings resurrection where human capacities have utterly failed.

Yet this divine activity is notoriously difficult to capture within the conventional tools of historical analysis. Academic historiography, with its methodological naturalism, is often ill-equipped to account for the invisible operations of grace within the contingencies of history. And therein lies both the challenge and the interest for those who engage these events theologically: it requires an intentional recognition of God's providential activity, even amidst the flawed and incomplete actions of human agents. The Nicene struggle, then, is not simply a chapter in ecclesiastical or imperial history, but a moment when divine grace worked through — and in spite of — human weakness to preserve the truth of the faith.

Faith (Re)Discovering Its Universality

David Ngong has approached the interpretation of the Nicene Creed from a theology of providence perspective, arguing that the triumph of orthodoxy was an act of divine providence.¹³⁷ Yet, as previously noted, while the Nicene Creed indeed emerges from providential circumstances, one might ask whether it was merely the providential victory of orthodoxy or more specifically was a manifestation of God's inexplicable grace triumphing on behalf of a persecuted and vulnerable church. A decolonial Pentecostal reading, attentive to the embodied human experiences beyond the formal locus of the Creed's formulation, compels us to reconsider what was truly at stake. This was not merely a doctrinal dispute over heresy but an existential crisis unfolding within

¹³⁶ Ferguson, *The Past is Prologue*, 2.

¹³⁷ See Ngong's *Theology as Construction of Piety*, especially chapter 2, "Providence and Triumph of Orthodoxy."

a fragile, volatile context where faith communities bore the fresh wounds of persecution.

Arius, in this reading, appears tragically naïve, failing to discern the *kairos* moment. His insistence on advancing a divisive theological position at such a precarious juncture reflects a dangerous disregard for the church's desperate need for unity, peace, and recovery. His inability — or refusal — to recognise the broader, life-and-death stakes for the faithful was not a harmless theological misjudgement but, in itself, a demonic disruption of the church's fragile healing. It exposed the church to further division and to the lurking threat of imperial suspicion and renewed persecution. Thus, the Council's victory was not simply the defeat of a theological error but a profound spiritual triumph: God, in his mercy, acted through human struggle and ecclesial deliberation to protect his people and sustain the church's witness amid forces intent on its destruction.

One cannot help but wonder how often those bishops prayed and fasted, both as individuals and in their regional churches, as they prepared for and gathered at Nicaea. The fear they must have carried — that they might squander a divine opportunity, and that another emperor, filled with hatred for the Church, might rise to renew persecution — would have weighed heavily upon them. Nicaea was not merely a Council of theological deliberation; it was a space of intense spiritual warfare. They contended not only against visible heresies, but against the powers, principalities, and demonic forces in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12) — against what could rightly be called the Luciferian heresy itself.

Had the Council ended in discord, had the bishops scattered like the people at the Tower of Babel, it is impossible to predict the trajectory the Church would have taken. The Nicene gathering was not only about doctrine but about preserving the unity, witness, and eschatological hope of the Church. In that sense, Nicaea was both a battlefield and a sanctuary — a moment when human weakness and divine providence met, and history was forever altered. At its heart, it stood as the Church's unflinching testimony to the faithfulness, truthfulness, and unyielding sovereignty of a God who moves decisively in history. It proclaimed, then as now, a God who reigns above emperors, yet can raise one as a messianic instrument — not to replace Christ, but to bear witness, however imperfectly, to his relentless love and redemptive purpose. This was no accidental convergence of religious compromise and philosophical debate, but the sovereign choreography of a God determined to vindicate God's name, preserve his people, and declare through his persecuted Church that his truth endures, his Church stands, and his love conquers still.

The victory of Constantine and the subsequent end of Christian persecution were indeed providential and empowered the Council to carefully discernment and comprehend the implications within the context of Constantine's pursuit of peace, harmony, and unity within the Roman Empire. The Nicene faith was a product of such human discerning imagination. It serves as an expression of

human intellectual awe towards the divine and a guide for human existence. It emerged as a symbolic representation of the conceptual reality and human acknowledgment of its “creaturiness” within the broader context of existence. The Creed was, in principle, an exercise in collective discernment, imaginative construction and ongoing struggle against forces of darkness. There is no theology or creed without its history. This means that creed construction is historically relative, forcing us to acknowledge the contingency and relativity of the Nicene faith. The interpretive process and the significant, inevitable role of undisclosed self-interests made the Creed vulnerable to the very forces that shaped its creation.

Therefore, over fifty years later, the Nicene faith was not only reaffirmed in the form of a slightly different creed, but the third article on the Holy Spirit was more fully developed in Constantinople in 381. This development stemmed from the conviction that the Holy Spirit is to be worshipped and glorified together with the Father and the Son. Seventy years thereafter, the Council of Chalcedon convened to address a different theological controversy, this time concerning the nature of Christ. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was reaffirmed, with the addition of a “definition” aimed at elucidating the correct interpretation of the second article, which had sparked controversy.¹³⁸ Although Walls characterises Chalcedon as the “great ecumenical failure”¹³⁹ of the fifth century, it nonetheless refined christology with precision, establishing definitive parameters for subsequent theological inquiry. Yet, despise its robust Nicene foundation, the Chalcedonian definition was utterly rejected by Egypt, Nubia, Ethiopia, India, the Syro-Persian Church of the East, as well as the majority of Syriac speakers.

This suggests that the Creeds are not subject to infinite reformulation because the Nicene Creed embodies the essential core of Christian faith. However, this core is the Creed’s natal capacity to be ever theologised according to the needs of various Christian believers in their specific social and historical circumstances. Every generation of Christians has a moral responsibility to reinterpret and theologize the Creed, drawing from it praxiological wisdom to respond effectively to the intellectual, existential, and other needs of their time. This ongoing process ensures that the Creed remains a living, dynamic force capable of guiding and nurturing the faith in ever-changing contexts. In the case of Pentecostalism, the needs of African people are entrenched in the coloniality of reality. And while some indigenous African theology-making might be considered heretical if it were penned by Dutch theologians, as Andrew

¹³⁸ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 14.

¹³⁹ Andrew F. Walls, “The Break-up of Early World Christianity and the Great Ecumenical Failure.” Also see Walls, “Overseas Ministries and the Subversion of Theological Education,” 12; and Walls, “Documentation and Ecclesial Deficit: A Personal Plea to Churches,” 132.

F. Walls contends, it may nonetheless be *more Christian* than the Dutch theology-making, even though it is certainly *less Chalcedonian*.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, we must pay attention to the ways the Nicene Spirituality has been decolonized in relation to postcolonial needs in African pentecostalism. This decolonial Pentecostal engagement has ensured that the post-Nicene belief-practices remain not only a theological anchor but also a catalyst for addressing the specific challenges and aspirations of African Christians.

This is important because the Creed did not originate as a “test of orthodoxy” but as the kernel of faith for the new manifestation of Christianity in the Roman Empire in which it now has an upper hand.¹⁴¹ Therefore, the Nicene Creed, so far as decolonial Pentecostal “conversation is concerned, is no longer a fixed arrangement inhospitable to theological categories, but it is an ongoing, creative, constitutive task in which [decolonial] imagination of a quite specific kind has a crucial role to play.”¹⁴² This also means that the mysteries that the Nicene Creed claims to be behind its articles are always under negotiation in the human quest to (re)discover their authentic self in Christ, the universal human. Decolonial Pentecostalism has demonstrated that the Nicene Creed was not conceived as a closed canon; rather, it was forged from a religiously, culturally, and politically chaotic context as a unifying language of faith that embodies an irreducible and fundamental reality perennially discoverable and discernible afresh at the very fringes of indeterminable horizons.

Conclusion

I have used a decolonial Pentecostal *back-gaze* perspective, looking back at the empire of Christianity critically, to show that the articulation of the Nicene Creed was not a smooth process but arose amid a myriad of challenges and existential questions that shaped the Christian experience in the fourth century. These challenges were both external (such as political and religious pressures) and internal (such as struggles for power and dissenting theological perspectives). The Nicene Creed evolved into an ecumenical theological framework that has continually inspired a parade of theological imaginations suited to specific needs in each cultural context. This inherent adaptability ensures that Christianity remains relevant and responsive to evolving human experiences, allowing it to adapt and flourish across diverse cultural landscapes.

The Nicene Creed did not arise in abstraction but was forged in response to lived, embodied spiritualities — some shaped by the suffering of persecution,

¹⁴⁰ Andrew F. Walls, “Some Recent Literature on Mission Studies,” 216–217.

¹⁴¹ Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 3.

¹⁴² Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, 17.

others by a resolute refusal to allow imperial power to have the final word over the faithful. These concrete experiences, diverse and at times contested, gradually found theoretical expression through the intellectual and linguistic frameworks available within the Greco-Roman world. Far from representing detached philosophical speculation, the Creed can thus be viewed as an intellectual crystallisation of spiritual, social, and political struggles — translated into conceptual language rigorous and coherent enough to engage the theological and political claims of empire. In this sense, embodied spirituality was neither erased nor romanticised but transformed into a doctrinal grammar capable of addressing both the existential realities of the faithful and the intellectual demands of its time. This remains the task of intellectual theology in the twenty-first century: to interrogate and critically engage the lived and embodied spiritualities of the faithful, however fragmented or incoherent they may appear, and to translate them into a theological grammar that is both intellectually coherent and capable of addressing the existential questions and concrete realities of contemporary life.

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The Creed of Nicaea 325

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Abstract

The original Nicene Creed of 325 is of particular importance to those who are interested in African theology. The debates which led to the Council of Nicaea had been sparked by the great third-century African theologian Origen, and they were worked through by Arius, Alexander, and the Egyptian church well before the advent of Constantine. Athanasius of Alexandria was the Creed's main champion for most of the fourth century. His stalwart confession of it in the face of imperial violence became the inspiration for the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches to put Nicaea's theology at the centre of their own theological self-understanding.

Résumé

Le Credo de Nicée original de 325 revêt une importance particulière pour ceux qui s'intéressent à la théologie africaine. Les débats qui ont conduit au concile de Nicée ont été déclenchés par le grand théologien africain du III^e siècle Origène, et ils ont été approfondis par Arius, Alexandre et l'Église égyptienne bien avant l'avènement de Constantin. Athanase d'Alexandrie fut le principal défenseur du Credo pendant la majeure partie du IV^e siècle. Sa confession inébranlable face à la violence impériale inspira les Églises copte et éthiopienne à placer la théologie de Nicée au centre de leur propre conception théologique.

Resumo

O Credo Niceno original de 325 é de particular importância para aqueles que se interessam pela teologia africana. Os debates que levaram ao Concílio de Nicéia foram desencadeados pelo grande teólogo africano do século III, Orígenes, e foram trabalhados por Ário, Alexandre e a Igreja egípcia muito antes do advento de Constantino. Atanásio de Alexandria foi o principal defensor do Credo durante a maior parte do século IV. A sua firme confissão do Credo diante da violência imperial inspirou as

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Igrejas Copta e Etíope a colocar a teologia de Nicéia no centro da sua própria compreensão teológica.

Keywords

Nicene Creed, Council of Nicaea, African christianity, African christian history, African theology, Origen, Arius, Athanasius

Mots-clés

Credo de Nicée, Concile de Nicée, christianisme africain, histoire du christianisme africain, théologie africaine, Origène, Arius, Athanase

Palavras-chave

Credo Niceno, Concílio de Nicéia, cristianismo africano, história cristã africana, teologia africana, Orígenes, Ário, Atanásio

Introduction

The Christian world in 2025 is celebrating, or at least discussing, the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea of 325. But this has frequently been done, not by looking at the actual Creed drawn up at Nicaea in 325, but at the Creed of 381, the Creed now frequently referred to as the Nicene Creed.¹ The distinctive elements of this later Creed, which was drawn up at Constantinople, were mainly based on the work of Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocia and Gregory of Nyssa, also in Cappadocia.² The original Creed of 325, however, parts of which were retained in the later Creed (including in particular the phrase “True God from True God” and the term ‘*homoousios*’), was a much more African document.³ It was a document written as a result of theological discussion between Egyptian and Libyan clergy, and it had a significant influence on the development of the Coptic Egyptian Church, and

¹ The Creed of 381 is often called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

² For discussions of the influence of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa on the Creed of 381, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, 211–221 and 253–260.

³ The texts of all the original documents connected with the Creed of Nicaea of 325 can be found on the comprehensive Wisconsin Lutheran College/Asia Lutheran Seminary website, “Fourth-Century Christianity,” <https://www.fourthcentury.com/>, currently indexed as [part of a “Resources for the celebration of the 1700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea \(AD 325\)” list](#). The text of the Creed is available at “The Creed of the Council of Nicaea” on that page; the Greek text on that site is taken from G. L. Dossetti, *Il Simbolo di Nicea e di Costantinopoli: Edizione critica*, 226–241; the English translation is by Aaron West.

on early Ethiopian Christianity as well.⁴ As Christianity strengthens in the Global South, and African Christianity re-considers its relationship to the theological formulations of the Early Church, it is important that the Africanness of the original Nicene Creed is not forgotten.⁵

This article will set out four ways in which the original Creed of Nicaea may be considered to issue from an African provenance and to continue to be of importance for early African Christianity specifically, as part of its world-wide ecumenical importance.

1. The source of the early fourth-century theological debate about God which eventually led to the Creed of 325 and its anathemas was the catechetical work *On First Principles* (*Περὶ Ἀρχῶν* / *Peri Archon* in Greek; *De Principiis* in Latin; the title could also be translated as ‘On the Origins’), written by the great third-century Egyptian Scripture exegete Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 – c. 253).⁶ In this work, Origen attempted to respond to the more philosophical questions of men and women living in the great Egyptian capital in his day who wanted to become Christians. This work continued to be read after Origen’s death, and continued to be used by Christians in Egypt, and elsewhere, as a basis for debates about the nature of God. These debates eventually led to the pre-Nicene disagreement about the eternity of the Son of God between Alexander of Alexandria (d. 328) and Arius of Alexandria (d. 336).
2. The Creed of 325 itself, including its anathemas, closely focused on judging as heretical and refuting the Trinitarian theology and Scripture exegesis of Arius specifically. The theological propositions which were used to do this stem from *Henos Somatos*, the encyclical letter of Alexander of Alexandria to all bishops, which may be partly the work

⁴ Each of the following Christians mentioned in this article has an entry (or several) in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (<https://dacb.org>): the Eunuch of Ethiopia, Mark the Evangelist, Titus Flavius Clemens (Clement of Alexandria), Origen, Athanasius, Frumentius, Aedesius, Ezana, Sayzana. (There is no entry yet for Arius, Alexander, or any of Arius’ Egyptian or Libyan supporters, or for the queen regent Ahyawa Sofya.) The “Ethiopian eunuch” of Acts 8 was, as Luke makes clear, a government official of the Nubian kingdom of Meroë, and not, as frequently assumed, a government official of Aksum (ancient Ethiopia). Κανδάκη (*kandákē*) is not the name of an individual queen (“Candace”) but is the Greek pronunciation of the Nubian title for regnal queens.

⁵ The importance of the African contribution to Early Christian doctrine is made more generally in Fessahaye Mebrahtu, “Black Catholic History: The Role of Africa in Christianity” and Kyama Mugambi, “Africa at Nicaea: Reclaiming our Place in the Foundations of Christian Doctrine.”

⁶ For an accessible English translation, see John Behr, ed. and trans., *Origen: On First Principles: A Reader’s Edition*.

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of the great Alexandrian theologian Athanasius of Alexandria.⁷ Arius, who was probably Libyan himself, was supported at Nicaea by two bishops from Upper Libya, Secundus of Ptolomais and Theonas of Marmarique; he was abandoned by his episcopal supporters from elsewhere.

3. Athanasius (c. 300 – 373), who succeeded Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria three years after the Council of Nicaea, became the main defender of the text of the Creed of 325, of its theological language and of its ecumenical importance, and hence the Confessor par excellence of the original Nicene Creed. In consequence, he stands at the fountainhead of the theology and self-understanding of the Coptic Orthodox Church. I have argued elsewhere that the original Nicene Creed (and hence therefore also the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381) would have sunk without trace if it had not been for the work of Athanasius.⁸
4. Athanasius's career was integral to the adoption of Christianity by Aksum (ancient Ethiopia) as a state from the fourth century on. It was Nicene Christianity which the state adopted, and the historical relationship of Christianity in Ethiopia to the Coptic Christianity of Egyptian Alexandria was, once again, a consequence of the work of Athanasius.⁹ Nonetheless, Ethiopic Nicene Christianity went wider than simple adulation of one bishop. Aksumite Christianity from the fourth century onwards emerged as a thinking, theologically educated church from its inception, like the Christianity of Alexandria itself.

In conclusion, I will argue that the Creed of 325, wherever one stands on its theology, should be recognized around the world as one of the most significant and lasting fruits of early African theological debate.

Origin of Alexandria and the origins of Egyptian debates concerning the Son's eternity

Origen's importance to fourth-century trinitarian debates has long been recognised.¹⁰ Since the late fourth century, his influence has often been regarded as largely negative, but in more recent years it has been recognised that the

⁷ "Letter of Alexander* of Alexandria to all bishops (*Henos sōmatos*)," ; for the argument that Athanasius was its author, see G. C. Stead, "Athanasius's Earliest Written Work."

⁸ Sara Parvis, "The Reception of Nicaea and Homoousios to 360."

⁹ See P. L. Shinnie, "The Nilotic Sudan and Ethiopia, c. 669 BC to c. AD 600," in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 2: *From c. 500 BC to AD 1050*, edited by J. D. Fage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 210–271.

¹⁰ See, for example, J. Rebecca Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius and Athanasius*.

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picture is rather more complicated than that. Origen, who had taught in the catechetical school in Alexandria in the early third century, influenced all subsequent Christian discussion of the Trinity, even among those who disagreed with him.¹¹

Early Christianity in Egypt had a double tradition, to both parts of which Origen contributed. On the one hand there was the rich philosophical tradition which went back to the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria in the first century, and before him to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint, which was the version used by the early Church. This philosophical tradition gave us Logos theology, the distinctively Egyptian Jewish spin on a Greek idea which was taken over by early Christians to become Logos Christology, the view that Jesus was the true Word of God made flesh. (The long-standing Egyptian theological valuing of ensouled flesh was also crucial to the development of Alexandrian Christianity.) On the other hand, the culture of Egyptian Christianity was also earthy and bruising. Some of the worst and most violent persecutions of Christianity took place in Egypt in the third and fourth centuries (the Coptic calendar to this day numbers years not according to *anno Domini* but by *anno martyrum*, because the Great Persecution under Diocletian was so traumatic and devastating). Origen himself was both a philosopher and a man who suffered torture for his faith.¹² St Mark's Gospel depicts Jesus as a man of the people, a man constantly pushed and shoved and mistreated and roughed around. It is no accident that, although St John's Gospel was always at the heart of Egyptian theology, the church of Alexandria was understood to have been founded by St Mark.

Converts to early Christianity were prepared intellectually and morally to join the Church by spending a minimum of three years as catechumens, studying Scripture and theology in preparation for confessing the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at baptism. The school for catechumens in Alexandria, the great capital of Egypt, was particularly intellectually rich, because many of those who attended it were experts in the Jewish scriptures, in Greek philosophy, or (like Origen himself) in both. Origen was employed by the Church of Alexandria to teach at the school, following on from the great Christian philosopher Clement of Alexandria.

¹¹ On Origen himself, see G. A. Oshitelu, "Origen (A)," John Anthony McGuckin, *Origen of Alexandria: Master Theologian of the Early Church*; and also Andrew F. Walls, "In Quest of the Father of Mission Studies," the latter was later revised first as "Scholarship under the Cross: Thinking Greek and Thinking Christian" and then as "Origen, the Father of Missions Studies." Origen's role in the overall controversy is discussed in Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 20–30. Despite later accusations of heresy, Origen died a Confessor, in communion with the universal Church of his day.

¹² Henry Chadwick makes this point in *The Early Church*, 100–113.

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The catechumens came from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Alexandria was a place of intersection between the Africa of the Upper Nile valley and the Africa of the Lower Nile and the Southern Mediterranean coast, and its Judaism came from the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea trade-routes and their trading links with the Nile as well as from Mediterranean trade-routes.¹³ The Alexandrian catechetical school taught all comers, old and young, rich and poor, educated and non-educated, men and women together, as all Christian catechetical schools at that period did.¹⁴ In many cases, it was the only form of real education available to the poor and to women, and people often remained in the catechetical schools even after they were baptised, learning as much as they could.¹⁵

Origen would later move to Caesarea in Palestine, where he would found the great library on the basis of which Eusebius of Caesarea wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* at the end of the third century. But the questions about the Trinity discussed in *On First Principles* come from his time teaching philosophically-minded converts to Christianity in Egypt. How did Christianity relate intellectually to Jewish and pagan Platonism and other philosophies? Was the created order eternal? When confessing Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as in St Matthew's Gospel, how did the Second Principle, the Son, relate to the Father, the First? What about the Third Principle, the Holy Spirit?

For Origen, all three were eternal, but so was creation itself.¹⁶ Father, Son, and Spirit were three distinct and enduring *hypostases* (entities). vOther rational beings, such as stars and planets and angels and human souls, were also eternal, but subordinate to the Trinity. They were all called to contemplate and worship the Father.

On First Principles was self-consciously speculative, taking the Rule of Faith (belief in Father, Son, and Spirit, in the Incarnation and in salvation) as its foundation and drawing out further cosmological and other implications from them, while being open to correction from other parts of Scripture. Origen approached many of the same themes more directly in his later exegetical works, particularly his *Commentary on John*. He made great theological use of the titles of Jesus from John's Gospel, particularly the four great titles of Wisdom, Logos, Truth, and Life. He saw these as the principal ways in which the Son ordered all

¹³ See David W. Phillipson, *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum and the Northern Horn, 1000 BC–AD 1300*. We can gain some idea of what the local Egyptian population, or at least its more elite members, looked like from surviving Fayyum mummy portraits.

¹⁴ See Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology*, 40. Other examples of African catechetical groups of mixed social status include the Scillitan Martyrs and Perpetua and Felicitas and their companions.

¹⁵ See Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments*, 32.

¹⁶ Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology*, 55.

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of creation, visible and invisible, rational and irrational, and gathered rational creation (stars and planets, angels and spirits, and human beings) and brought it from its fallen state back into full contemplation and joyful worship of the Father. The job of the Spirit, meanwhile, was to teach and help Christians specifically to do this within the Church, despite persecution and temptations to turn away from God. For Origen, it was important that the Spirit worked hand in hand with the Logos both in God and in creatures: the Spirit did not bypass the human intellect (as he believed the Montanist charismatics had taught), but worked with and through it.¹⁷

What had altered by the early fourth century in Alexandrian thought which drew on Origen was the abandonment by all sides of Origen's belief that creation was eternal. Both Arius and Alexander believed that the created order had come into being at a moment in time. They were also agreed that the Father was eternal. The question was whether the Son was also eternal or not. In consequence, was the Son a different sort of being from the Father, or not? Was it only the Father we should worship as true God, or also the Son and the Spirit? These were questions which were fiercely fought out in Egypt and Libya in particular.¹⁸

The Creed and anathemas of 325 and their close focus on the theology of Arius

Let us begin with the text of the Creed of 325, together with its anathemas, because they should be read together. The anathemas are often neglected in discussion of the Creed of 325, but they are an important counterpoint to the Creed, offering theological specifics which sharply focus the more general terms of the Creed itself on the theology of Arius, as we shall see:¹⁹

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things seen and unseen.

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father, through whom all things came to be, both the things in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our

¹⁷ Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.7.3.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the Alexandrian context of the pre-Nicene debates, see Rebecca Lyman, "Arius and Arianism: The Origins of the Alexandrian Controversy."

¹⁹ Commentators sometimes claim that the terminology of the Creed of 325 is vague and intended to include a variety of viewpoints, seeing this as evidence for the influence of Constantine on the text of the Creed, but the specificity of the anathemas belies this interpretation. E.g., see James Corke-Webster, "What Really Happened at Nicaea."

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salvation came down and was made flesh, becoming human, who suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, who is coming to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence, or a creation, or changeable, or alterable.²⁰

The ‘Arian controversy’ as a whole was about that quintessentially African Christian question of what does and does not count as theologically correct worship of God (‘orthodoxy’, from ‘right glory’).²¹ In particular, the debate was about whether the Son and Spirit should be worshipped by us and by the angels and powers alongside the Father, or not. This question went much further than Egypt and Libya: by 325, it was being discussed across the whole of the Eastern half of the empire, and it was only really concluded after 381. But it was the debates in Egypt and Libya which identified and crystallised the problem, and offered the solution.

Much has been written on the Trinitarian theology of the period immediately before Nicaea.²² But it is important to note that both the Nicene Creed and its anathemas were closely focused specifically on the terminology of two documents written by Arius: his Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia, and his Letter to Alexander of Alexandria.²³ The dating of these and of the other key documents which circulated before the Council of Nicaea continues to be debated by scholars, and cannot be fixed on the basis of the current evidence, but they certainly both date before Constantine came East.²⁴ The emperor Constantine may have been responsible for calling the Council of Nicaea in the first place, or he may simply have moved an already planned council to the

²⁰ Aaron West, trans., “Creed of the Council of Nicaea.”

²¹ One of the defining strengths of Egyptian Christianity is often seen as the coherence between worship and theology. In the cases of Origen and Athanasius in particular, we see that liturgy and the lived practice of the Church often preceded formal theological articulation.

²² Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 11–84, offers useful wider groupings of the different theological accounts of the relationship of Father and Son on display in the early fourth century.

²³ “Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia;” see also Corke-Webster, “What really happened at Nicaea.”

²⁴ On the chronology of the pre-Nicene documents, see the discussion in “Documents of the Early Arian Controversy,” which compares different scholarly reconstructions.

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imperial palace at Nicaea.²⁵ But it is beyond question that the initial debate had already been worked through theologically and ecclesially in the churches in Egypt and Libya well before Constantine defeated Licinius in September 324 and became sole ruler of the whole Roman empire. Nicaea was about the response of the rest of the bishops of Licinius's and then Constantine's regions to what the African churches had already decided. The other bishops decided (with the exception of two Libyans) that the African churches were right.

Arius, a priest of Alexandria and apparently at one point a candidate for the role of bishop there, was most likely Libyan by origin.²⁶ The content of his disagreement with Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria since 313, focused, at least in the early stages, on the question of eternity. Arius, in his letter to Eusebius, complains that Alexander had publicly said the following:

There was "always a God, always a Son;" "as soon as the Father, so soon the Son [existed];" "with the Father co-exists the Son unbegotten, ever-begotten, begotten without begetting;" "God neither precedes the Son in aspect or in a moment of time;" "always a God, always a Son, the Son being from God himself."²⁷

Arius continues,

But what do we say and think and what have we previously taught and do we presently teach? — that the Son is not unbegotten, nor a part of an unbegotten entity in any way, nor from anything in existence, but that he is subsisting in will and intention before time and before the ages, full <of grace and truth>, God, the only-begotten, unchangeable. Before he was begotten, or created, or defined, or established, he was not. For he was not unbegotten. But we are persecuted because we have said the Son has a beginning but God has no beginning. We are persecuted because of that and for saying he came to be from nothing. But we said this since he is not a portion of God nor of anything in existence. That is why we are persecuted; you know the rest.

²⁵ See H. A. Drake, "The Elephant in the Room: Constantine at the Council." For the argument that Constantine's influence on the Council of Nicaea has been greatly exaggerated, as has that of fourth-century emperors in general on the development of Christian doctrine, see my "Nicaea to Constantinople I: Lessons from Fourth-Century Ecclesiastical Politics."

²⁶ For Arius's Libyan identity, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381*, pp. 3–5. On Arius's philosophy and theology, as well as the traditions of intellectual thought on which Arius drew, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*. On fourth-century theology in the tradition of Arius and his supporters, see most recently Brendan Wolfe, Mattias Gassman, and Oliver Langworthy, *Arianism Revisited: An Introduction to Non-Nicene Theologies*.

²⁷ "Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia."

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The anathemas of the Creed of Nicaea directly reference this exchange:

The catholic and apostolic church condemns those who say concerning the Son of God that “there was when he was not” or “he did not exist before he was begotten” or “he came to be from nothing” or who claim that he is of another subsistence or essence, or a creation, or changeable, or alterable.²⁸

In his letter Ἡ φιλαρχος (*Hē philarchos*, ‘Ambition’), addressed in the version that survives to Alexander of ‘Constantinople’ (then Byzantium), Alexander of Alexandria responds to the eternity question as follows:

Would it not be unholy to say that at one time the power of God did not exist, or his Word, or anything else that describes the Son and characterizes the Father at the same time? To say that the brightness of the Father’s glory [cf. Heb 1:3] “once did not exist” destroys the original light too, because the brightness comes from it. If the image of God did not always exist, then it is clear that God, in whose image the Son is, also did not always exist.²⁹

Alexander is here using arguments that had been used by Origen. Their basis is exegesis of 1 Corinthians 2:4, “Christ, power of God and wisdom of God.” If Christ is *power of God*, he must be eternal, and if he is eternal, he must be true God and to be worshipped as such.³⁰

Arius’s Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia is a private document. For Arius’s official theology, we should turn to the creedal document he and the priests and deacons who agreed with him addressed to Alexander in his own defence. It is worth giving in full, because it shows the theological platform on which he wanted to be judged.³¹

Our faith from our forefathers, which also we learned from you, blessed father, is this: We acknowledge One God, alone unbegotten, alone eternal, alone without beginning, alone true, alone having immortality, alone wise, alone good, alone sovereign, judge of all, governor, and provider, unalterable and unchangeable, just and good, God of the Law and the Prophets and the New Testament; he begot an only-begotten Son before time and the ages, through whom he made both the ages [Heb 1:2] and all that was

²⁸ West, trans., “Creed of the Council of Nicaea.”

²⁹ “Alexander’s Letter to Alexander of Byzantium* (*Hē philarchos*).”

³⁰ On the third- and fourth-century history of Power of God arguments in Trinitarian theology, see Michel René Barnes, *The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology*.

³¹ Glen L. Thompson, trans., “Letter of Arius and his followers to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria.”

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made; who begot him not in appearance, but in reality; and that he made him subsist at his own will, unalterable and unchangeable, the perfect creature of God, but not as one of the creatures; offspring, but not as one of the other things begotten; nor as Valentinus pronounced that the offspring of the Father was an emanation; nor as the Manicheans taught that the offspring was a one-in-essence-portion of the Father; nor as Sabellius, dividing the Monad, speaks of a Son-Father; nor as Hieracas speaks of one torch [lit] from another, or as a lamp divided into two; nor that he who existed before was later generated or created anew into a Son, as you yourself, O blessed father, have often condemned both in church services and in council meetings; but, as we say, he was created at the will of God, before time and before the ages, and came to life and being from the Father, and the glories which coexist in him are from the Father. For when giving to him [the Son] the inheritance of all things [Heb 1:2], the Father did not deprive himself of what he has without beginning in himself; for he is the source of all things. Thus there are three subsisting realities [hypostases]. And God, being the cause of all that happens, is absolutely alone without beginning; but the Son, begotten apart from time by the Father, and created and founded before the ages, was not in existence before his generation, but was begotten apart from time before all things, and he alone came into existence from the Father. For he is neither eternal nor co-eternal nor co-unbegotten with the Father, nor does he have his being together with the Father, as some speak of relations, introducing two unbegotten beginnings. But God is before all things as monad and beginning of all. Therefore he is also before the Son, as we have learned also from your public preaching in the church. Therefore he thus has his being from God; and glories, and life, and all things have been given over to him; in this way God is his beginning. For he is over him, as his God and being before him. But if the expressions “from him” [Rom. 11:36] and “from the womb” [Ps. 109:3 (LXX), 110:3 English] and “I came from the Father,” and “I have come” [John 16:28], are understood by some to mean that he is part of him [the Father], one in essence and as an emanation, then the Father is, according to them, compounded and divisible and alterable and material, and, as far as their belief goes, the incorporeal God endures a body.

I pray that you fare well in the Lord, blessed father. Arius; the priests Aethales, Achilles, Carpones, Sarmatas and Arius; the deacons Euzoios, Lucius, Julius, Menas, Helladius, and Gaius; the

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bishops Secundas of the Pentapolis, Theonas of Libya, and Pistus whom the Arians [later] set up [as bishop] at Alexandria.

This statement of Arius was condemned first by the Church of Alexandria, and then by a council of the 100 bishops of Egypt and Libya.³² The original Nicene Creed also ruled this theology out of court:

We believe . . . in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father, through whom all things came to be, both the things in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, becoming human, who suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, who is coming to judge the living and the dead.³³

The body of the Creed, as we see here, targets Arius's assertions about the difference in substance between Father and Son. The questions of the eternity of the Son which he had raised were dealt with in the anathemas, as already noted. In the text of the Creed itself, the emphasis was on defining theologically acceptable ways of understanding the Scriptural term *begotten*, and on countering Arius's claim that the Father was 'alone true God'. 'Begotten' was not to be used as a way of distinguishing the Son's ontology from that of the 'unbegotten' Father, or as a way of saying the Son was later in time than the Father, but rather as a way of saying Father and Son, analogously to a human parent and child, are of the same essence. The authors of the Nicene Creed insisted that the Son was 'from the essence of the Father' and '*homoousios* ('of the same being') with the Father', because they wanted to counter Arius's arguments that the Son was something different in nature and essence from the Father. It would take another great Egyptian theologian to set out the thinking behind this more clearly: Athanasius of Alexandria.

Athanasius's defence of the theological language of the original Nicene Creed

From the time of Nicaea on, Constantine and his successors attempted to rein in the see of Alexandria. Constantine decided unilaterally to pardon and reinstate Arius two years after Nicaea, and tried to force Alexander to agree; Alexander stalled for time, and sent Athanasius, his deacon-secretary, to the

³² "Letter from Alexander of Alexandria to his clergy" and "Letter of Alexander* of Alexandria to all bishops (*Henos sōmatos*)."

³³ "Creed of the Council of Nicaea."

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imperial court to argue his case. Alexander died in 328, and Athanasius was elected and installed as his successor.³⁴

Athanasius's career as Bishop of Alexandria lasted from his consecration on 8 June 328 to his death on 2 May 373.³⁵ Of these nearly 45 years, however, almost 18 were spent in exile or in hiding. He was sent away or strategically withdrew from Alexandria five times: from November 335 to November 337, from April 339 to October 346, from February 356 to February 362, from October 362 to February 364, and from October 365 to February 366. The first exile he spent in Trier, the second in Rome and various other parts of Europe, and the others in hiding in both male and female monastic communities up and down the Nile and beyond.

Athanasius was of low birth: he may not have known either his own age or who his father was.³⁶ He was adopted and educated by Alexander, and seems to have been at home in both Coptic and Hellenistic cultural milieux. It is likely that he could code-switch freely, and disappear into an Egyptian crowd at will: stories abound of his escaping from imperial guards and escorts. His many works rely heavily on Scripture citations and on natural rhetorical force. He had clearly learned much from the theology of Irenaeus, although he also well understood the norms of the Origenist tradition. He was a very effective theologian, able to find room for different traditional approaches to the Trinity, while being absolutely opposed to any Christology which alienated the essence of the Father from that of the Son.

He came late to the theological defence of the text of the Creed of Nicaea and of the term *homoousios*: up until his first exile in 335, he was simply trying to avoid being forced to accept Arius back into the clergy of Alexandria. In his second, from 339 to 346, he was left trying to defend himself from the theological innovations of his own allies at the Western Council of Serdica of 343, which he partly did by returning to a defence of the term *homoousios* in his three *Orations against the Arians* of the early 340s. In this, he was supported by Julius, a

³⁴ On the political career of Athanasius and his wrangles with Constantine and his successors, see Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*. On his theology, see Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: the Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine*. On his relationship with Egyptian Christianity specifically, see Annick Martin, *Athanase d'Alexandrie et l'église d'Égypte au IV^e siècle (328–373)*.

³⁵ I have set out my own account of Athanasius's contribution to the survival of the original Creed of Nicaea during the years 328–360 at greater length in Parvis, "Reception of Nicaea."

³⁶ Athanasius was accused of being younger than his thirtieth year when he was elected bishop, but that charge was quickly dropped, presumably because there was no reliable evidence to be had by 328 on either his age or his paternity.

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particularly judicious Bishop of Rome. But from 353 onwards, once Constantius was sole ruler of the whole Roman Empire, Athanasius became the main theological defender in *On the Decrees of Nicaea* of the wording of the original Nicene Creed, including the non-Scriptural phrases ‘homooousios with the Father’ and ‘from the essence of the Father’.

The fifth-century histories which cover the Arian controversy make a great deal of Athanasius’s bravery and his persistence as a confessor of orthodoxy, but the Antiochene and Constantinopolitan historical traditions are more interested in the colourful stories surrounding him than in his theology, which was not always perfectly aligned with their own.

Egypt was the rock on which Roman imperial Christianity foundered. Emperors sought to control it theologically and ecclesio-politically, but failed on both counts. Athanasius outlasted the attempts of four different emperors (Constantine, Constantius II, Julian, and Valens) to remove him and replace him with a more imperially amenable figure (Pistus, Gregory, George, and Lucius, respectively). The Bishop of Rome put paid to Pistus by refusing to recognise him. Gregory lasted six years, but on his death Constantius, at the behest of his brother Constans, allowed Athanasius to return and resume his former office. George was lynched immediately after Constantius’s death. Lucius, who was only installed after Athanasius’ death, fled to Constantinople when Valens left Antioch in 378.

Athanasius’s long and poignant *History of the Arians* sets out in detail the moves that Constantius made in 356 to bring the Egyptian churches under control, using a great deal of violence against clergy, monks and nuns and the recipients of the church poor fund, both in Alexandria and throughout Egypt. Clergy were banished to the Great Oasis, and nuns and widows publicly attacked. The same sort of moves were made by Valens in the case of Lucius. But this sort of violent attempt at imperial control was never successful for very long, and simply hardened the Egyptian church in its own identity.

We can see the development of Coptic literature as a unifying force in the Egyptian church begin during Athanasius’s career. A recent discovery of a fourth-century Coptic papyrus roll which includes Athanasius’ *Letter to Dracontius* offers evidence for his yearly Festal Letters giving the date of Easter being circulated in Sahidic Coptic as well as Greek from 354, in a dialect associated with Upper Egypt.³⁷ The amount of polemical literature that Athanasius was able to circulate during his 356–362 period in hiding implies

³⁷ Sofia Torallas Tovar, “Athanasius’ Letter to Dracontius: A Fourth-century Coptic Translation in a Papyrus Roll (P.Monts.Roca inv.14).”

access to extensive desert monastic copying facilities, probably including in women's communities (as Origen had employed women scribes).

Athanasius, before his death, had persuaded most of the Roman empire that being prepared to confess the (original) Nicene Creed and use the term 'homousios' of the relationship between Father and Son was essential to orthodox worship of the Trinity. Persecution of the Egyptian church continued for another five years, but for the most part, his work was done. Nicaea 325 would become World Christianity's great unifying Council, to which all lasting Christian churches between the sixth and eighteenth centuries would subscribe.³⁸ 'Homousios with the Father' would become the way that Christians would say that Christ is truly God.

The adoption of Nicene Christianity by the Kingdom of Aksum

The development of Christianity as the religion of Ethiopia at state level is a product of the Aksumite civilisation of the fourth–eighth centuries.³⁹ King Ezana is now generally accepted on archaeological and numismatic grounds to have converted first from polytheism to monotheism, and then to Trinitarian Christianity.⁴⁰ During this period, he extended Axumite rule to Meroë in the Nile Valley, and into parts of Sudan and Somalia, connecting up the waterborne trade routes with the Roman Empire on both sides.

His conversion is connected both by the Ethiopian Synaxarion and by a number of Roman ecclesiastical historians of the fourth and fifth centuries with two Tyrian slave-boys, Frumentius and Aedesius.⁴¹ Frumentius (*F'rē Menatos* in Ge'ez) would become Abba Salama I, Ethiopia's first bishop. Rufinus's *Ecclesiastical History* gives more details of the mission, including their capture and sale to the royal family, their career supporting Ezana's mother the queen-regent (otherwise identified as Ahyawa Sofya), and Frumentius's church-building campaign. When Ezana came of age, Aedesius returned to Tyre, but

³⁸ The Primitive Christianity movement from the early nineteenth century onwards would dispense with church councils as standards of authority.

³⁹ S. C. Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991). On the Christian archaeology of Adulis in particular, see Gabriele Castiglia, "Architecture, Liturgy, Chronology: Aksumite Christianity as a Cosmopolitan Paradigm (?) — the case study of Adulis (Eritrea)." Castiglia argues that the archaeological record suggests widespread Christian worship buildings in Adulis are a product of the fifth century rather than the fourth, implying that fourth-century Christianity was largely confined to the royal court.

⁴⁰ See Steven Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered," also Sergew Hable-Selassie, "Ezana ('Ezana) (C)."

⁴¹ The earliest account is to be found in Rufinus of Aquileia, *Ecclesiastical History*, 10.9. Rufinus claims to have heard the story from Aedesius.

Frumentius went (or was sent) to Athanasius to ask for bishops for the kingdom. This seems to have taken place in the early 330s. In response, Athanasius consecrated Frumentius himself, as Frumentius had presumably intended. Whether Constantine was involved is not clear, but since Tyre was a pro-Arian see at that point, and his brother Aedesius had returned there, Frumentius must have been well aware of the theological choice he was making in traveling down the Nile to Alexandria in order to seek a consecrator for a bishop, rather than the Arabian gulf in the direction of Jerusalem or further afield to Antioch.

In 356, after Athanasius's flight, Constantius II wrote to "Ezana and Sayzana," the "barbarian" Aksumite rulers (in fact, they were literate in several languages, including Greek), evidently concerned that Athanasius might have fled to Ethiopia and be looking for support.⁴² He demanded (though without military menaces) that Frumentius be sent back to Alexandria to be examined by Athanasius's Arian replacement George, and re-ordained by him if found theologically reliable. It is not a particularly diplomatic document, treating the Aksumite rulers peremptorily as ignorant fools. Athanasius gained access to the text of the letter, and included it in his *Apology to Constantius*, and in the *History of the Arians*, as evidence of Constantius's unreasonable ill-will.

Nothing is known of Frumentius's career after 356, but Ethiopia remained firmly allied to Alexandria, including in refusing to accept the results of the Council of Chalcedon of 451. The earliest known collection of Christian non-biblical documents translated into Ge'ez from Greek is the Aksumite Collection, a fifth-sixth-century compilation which includes the fourth-century 'Antioch collection' of canons, the late fourth-century *History of the Episcopate of Alexandria*, and a number of other documents pertaining to Alexandria's position in wider fourth- and fifth-century ecclesiastical politics.⁴³ The *History of the Episcopate of Alexandria* is particularly interesting, because it makes the case for the importance of the Church of Alexandria before Athanasius, in particular in the time of Alexander's predecessor Peter the Martyr, and argues that Peter himself expelled Arius from the Alexandrian church before Alexander did so.⁴⁴ Alexandria is presented as the oldest, most important, church in the East, in a detailed account of its own past extensively and plausibly bulwarked by data concerning bishops of the second and third centuries. Ethiopia never

⁴² On the letter, see Benjamin Hendrickx, "The 'Letter' of Constantius II to Ezana and Sezana: A note on its purpose, range and impact in an Afro-Byzantine context."

⁴³ Alessandro Bausi, Antonella Brita, Marco Di Bella, et al., "The Aksumite Collection or Codex Σ (*Sinodos of Qəfrəyā*, ms C₃-IV-71/C₃-IV-73, Ethio-SPaRe UM-039): Codicological and Palaeographical Observations: With a Note on Material Analysis of Inks."

⁴⁴ Alessandro Bausi and Alberto Camplani, "New Ethiopic Documents for the History of Christian Egypt."

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seems to have taken the Roman imperial line against the Church of Egypt at any period when the two were in conflict, but Ethiopians clearly studied the whole issue of Alexandrian authority extremely carefully, and made detailed information about it available in their own literary language. Ethiopia was Nicene, anti-Arian, and non-Chalcedonian — but not without thinking about it first.

Conclusion

Many Christian theologians of the present day are used to equating Nicaea with the Creed of 381, without stopping to think too long about its relationship with the Creed of 325. But a proper account of the origins of African theology demands that we reconsider that reflex. In this paper, I have highlighted the specifically Egyptian context both of the background to the Nicene debates in the work of the Egyptian theologian Origen, and of the Nicene debates themselves. The Creed of 325 and its anathemas addressed the theological questions, debates, concerns and answers about the Trinity which had been thrown up by Egyptian and Libyan theologians in the third and early fourth centuries. Constantine, sometimes mistakenly seen as the author of the Creed of Nicaea 325, or of its key terminology, came on the scene after the terminological debates had come to a head, as I have demonstrated here. The terminology of the Nicene Creed and its anathemas comes directly from the Alexandrian debates between Arius and Alexander of Alexandria.

Egypt continued to be at the forefront of the Nicene debates throughout the fourth century. Nicaea's theological insistence that the Son was true God, eternal, and the same in essence as the Father was taken up by Athanasius, though shorn of the specific terminology, in *On the Incarnation*. The natural Son of God, eternal and stable by nature, from sheer love and generosity comes and takes human flesh to save contingent and unstable human beings by making us God's adopted children alongside him. Athanasius underwent five exiles and risked his life on numerous occasions for this theology; from the 340s on, he increasingly risked his life to defend Nicaea's actual terminology, and particularly the word *homoousios*.

It was this theology that the slave-boy Frumentius, one of two survivors of a massacre, chose for Aksum, his adopted country, and this theology that the royal family of Axum and eventually the whole kingdom chose for themselves. The Creed of Constantinople 381 eventually became the worldwide liturgical expression of that theology. But it was the determined theology of true God incarnate of the Creed of 325 that African theologians gave the world.

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⁴⁵ This article is part of the "Classic DACB Collection," which includes all DACB articles published between 1995–2015.

⁴⁶ Editors' note: This was reprinted as chapter 2 in *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Ethiopia*, edited by Alessandro Bausi, 27–34 (London: Routledge, 2012, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315250854>

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Täwahädo Theologizing as a Possible Guide for Ecumenical Fellowship in the Spirit of Nicaea¹

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Abstract

The Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahädo* Church (EOTC) embodies a vibrant and unique heritage of self-theologizing that is both consistent with Nicene formulations and deeply accommodating of non-Western epistemic assumptions. As the only country in Africa never to be colonized, Ethiopia boasts an ancient written language, Gə‘əz (ግዕዝ), and a theological heritage that was virtually devoid of any direct Greek philosophical influence until the twentieth century. *Täwahädo* (ተዋሕዶ) is the term used today to express the Christology of the EOTC. More broadly and deeply, however, it encapsulates the manner by which the EOTC embraces the mystery of life in Christ through ‘Harmonious Tension’ and embodied practical experience. This article briefly explores the historical usage and development of *täwahädo* in the EOTC tradition to highlight several important characteristics and suggest ways that other church traditions might be able to learn how to better hold apparently contradictory theological perspectives in tension for the benefit of the Global Church.

Résumé

L’Église orthodoxe éthiopienne *Täwahädo* (EOTC : *Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahädo Church* en anglais) incarne un héritage dynamique et unique de théologie autonome, à la fois conforme aux formulations nicéennes et profondément accommodante envers les hypothèses épistémiques non

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occidentales. Seul pays d'Afrique à n'avoir jamais été colonisé, l'Éthiopie possède une langue écrite ancienne, le Gə'əz (ግዕዝ), et un héritage théologique qui a été pratiquement dépourvu de toute influence philosophique grecque directe jusqu'au XXe siècle. *Tāwahaḍo* (ተዋሕዶ) est le terme utilisé aujourd'hui pour exprimer la christologie de l'EOTC. Plus largement et plus profondément, cependant, il résume la manière dont l'EOTC embrasse le mystère de la vie en Christ à travers une « tension harmonieuse » et une expérience pratique incarnée. Cet article explore brièvement l'usage historique et le développement du *tāwahaḍo* dans la tradition de l'Église orthodoxe éthiopienne afin de mettre en évidence plusieurs caractéristiques importantes et de suggérer des moyens par lesquels d'autres traditions ecclésiales pourraient apprendre à mieux maintenir en tension des perspectives théologiques apparemment contradictoires, dans l'intérêt de l'Église mondiale.

Resumo

A Igreja Ortodoxa Etíope *Tāwahaḍo* (EOTC: *Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahaḍo Church* em inglês) incorpora uma herança vibrante e única de autoteologização que é consistente com as formulações nicenas e profundamente receptiva às premissas epistêmicas não ocidentais. Sendo o único país africano que nunca foi colonizado, a Etiópia possui uma língua escrita antiga, o Gə'əz (ግዕዝ), e uma herança teológica que esteve praticamente isenta de qualquer influência filosófica grega direta até ao século XX. *Tāwahaḍo* (ተዋሕዶ) é o termo usado hoje para expressar a cristologia da EOTC. De forma mais ampla e profunda, porém, ele resume a maneira pela qual a EOTC abraça o mistério da vida em Cristo por meio da «Tensão Harmoniosa» e da experiência prática incorporada. Este artigo explora brevemente o uso histórico e o desenvolvimento de *tāwahaḍo* na tradição da EOTC para destacar várias características importantes e sugerir maneiras pelas quais outras tradições eclesiais poderiam aprender a melhor manter em tensão perspectivas teológicas aparentemente contraditórias, para o benefício da Igreja Global.

Keywords

Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahaḍo* Church (EOTC), Council of Nicaea, Self-Theologizing, Majority World Christian Theologies, Indigenous African Spirituality, Ecumenical Dialogue, *Tawahedo*, *Tāwahedo*, *Tewahedo*

Mots-clés

Église Orthodoxe Éthiopienne *Tāwahaḍo*, Concile de Nicée, auto-théologie, théologies chrétiennes du monde majoritaire, spiritualité

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africaine indigène, dialogue œcuménique, *Tawahedo*, *Tāwahedo*,
Tewahedo

Palavras-chave

Igreja Ortodoxa Etíope de *Tāwahaḍo*, Concílio de Niceia, autoteologia,
teologias cristãs maioritárias do mundo, espiritualidade indígena
africana, diálogo ecumênico, *Tawahedo*, *Tāwahedo*, *Tewahedo*

Introduction

Considerable diversity existed at the Council of Nicaea in 325, but far more ethnic, cultural, and theological diversity exists within Christianity today. The Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahaḍo* Church² (henceforth EOTC)³ embodies a unique manner of doing theology that is simultaneously aligned with Nicene formulations and deeply accommodating of the various cultural and epistemic assumptions found today throughout Majority World⁴ Christianity. Key here is the virtual absence of direct Greek philosophical influence upon the traditional theological fabric of the EOTC, meaning that Christians in diverse Majority World contexts increasingly representative of Roman Catholic (e.g., Brazil, Mexico, Philippines, DRC), Protestant (e.g., Nigeria, China, Tanzania), and Orthodox (e.g., India, Syria, Romania) populations can likely benefit from the ways that Ethiopian Christians have traditionally articulated the mysteries of the Triune God.

In this year of the seventeenth centennial of the Council of Nicaea, it is appropriate to consider how the only uncolonized country in Africa has faithfully preserved, developed, expanded, and enriched their incredible Nicene

² Amharic: የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን። (*Yäityopya Ortodoks Tāwahaḍo Betä Krəstiyan*).

³ It is important here to acknowledge the Eritrean Orthodox *Tāwahaḍo* Church, which many scholars rightfully discuss in tandem with the EOTC. E.g., Stéphane Ancel, Giulia Bonacci, and Joachim Persoon, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church.” The Eritrean Orthodox *Tāwahaḍo* Church gained autocephaly in 1993 with Eritrea’s independence yet shares all the same core religious literature and outlooks of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahaḍo* Church (although with some nuances). I do not wish to exclude Eritrea or my dear Eritrean colleagues from this conversation, but find it somewhat easier to focus on Ethiopia for the specific purposes of this article as it is the only country not colonized in Africa and because it has a somewhat greater focus upon the *Kəbra’ Nāgāšt* (Gə‘əz: ክብረ ነገሥት, ‘The Glory of Kings’) that I discuss briefly below.

⁴ The phrase ‘Majority World’ was first coined by Shahidul Alam as a positive alternative to ‘Third World’, ‘Developing World’, and ‘LDCs’ (Least Developed Countries), all of which conceal “histories of oppression and continued exploitation” and “hinder the appreciation of the cultural and social wealth.” See Shahidul Alam, “Majority World: Challenging the West’s Rhetoric of Democracy,” 89.

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(and legitimately ‘pre-Chalcedonian’⁵) Christian heritage in ways that might be beneficial for other Christians of Africa and for the growing majority of global Christians who find classically Greek formulations to be somewhat disconnected from their daily lives of faith. Much like the African Athanasius was driven to develop Nicene theology in his Anti-Arian polemics due to soteriological implications for the common Christian of his day, the EOTC has developed Nicene theology in ways that contributed to what is becoming one of the largest and most vibrant Christian traditions in the world.⁶

In this article, I will bring together new findings about the development of *tāwahaḍo* (ተዋሕዶ) as a theological concept with more established notions of ‘self-theologizing’ to outline several ways that the historic example of the EOTC might provide helpful avenues for ecumenical interactions in the 21st century. Specifically, I will focus on two important dimensions of what I am here calling ‘*Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing’:

1. the central concept of ‘Harmonious Tension’; and
2. the insistence upon *embodied* (and practical) spirituality informing doctrinal dialogue.

I will conclude by sketching three areas for potential application of these aspects of *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing in the spirit of Nicaea.

Nicaea and the Foundations of the EOTC’s *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing

Whereas the EOTC’s eventual rejection⁷ of the decisions made at the Council of Chalcedon is well-known and amply discussed, her embrace of Nicaea is more frequently simply taken for granted. The EOTC’s deep coherence with Nicaea is vital, however, not just for describing it as a ‘pre-Chalcedonian’ Christian tradition but also for cementing its rich theology as

⁵ Grillmeier uses this phrase repeatedly with reference to different aspects of the EOTC in his extensive work on Christology. See especially Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Volume 2, Part 4: *From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590–604)*, *The Church of Alexandria with Nubia and Ethiopia after 451*, pp. 336, 372, 384. For an example of other authoritative scholars using this phrase, see V. C. Samuel, *The Council of Chalcedon Re-Examined*.

⁶ Currently boasting 55+ million adherents, the EOTC is projected to surpass the Russian Orthodox Church in the year 2050 as the largest autocephalous Orthodox Church in the world (with roughly 85–90 million adherents). Barring any drastic demographic changes, the EOTC will also likely eclipse the size of the World Assemblies of God Fellowship, the World Methodist Council, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Worldwide Anglican Communion. See Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities*, 93–118; and John Binns, *The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia: A History*, 232.

⁷ Even though the EOTC adopted the Coptic Church’s rejection of Chalcedon, the decisions from that council remained only “vaguely known” until about the fifteenth century when Giyorgis of Gaššeche (ጊዮርጊስ ዘጋሠጫ) wrote his *Book of Mystery* (መጽሐፈ፡ ምሥጢር፡; *Maṣḥafā Māṣṭir*). See Witold Witakowski, “Chalcedon, Council Of,” 710.

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something from which all other Christians can learn. Therefore, it is worth reviewing briefly some of the main ways that Nicaea is remembered and championed in the EOTC.

Although no Ethiopian was present at the Council of Nicaea, Frumentius⁸ — the first Bishop of Ethiopia, venerated in the EOTC tradition as the Revealer of Light (ከሣቲ ብርሃን; *Kāsate Bərhan*) — met with Athanasius in Alexandria sometime after the latter was made Patriarch, perhaps circa 330.⁹ Frumentius was clearly aware of the issues at Nicaea, and was “certainly involved”¹⁰ in Anti-Arian debates of his day. The EOTC’s quick adoption of Nicene theology is confirmed by formulations in several archaeological and numismatic artifacts.¹¹

More significant for the present discussion is the theological legacy that the Council of Nicaea has obtained within the EOTC. Numerous Ethiopic literary and liturgical passages reflect the high place that Nicaea holds in the tradition. For example, one eucharistic anaphora¹² of the EOTC highlights Nicaea,¹³ and it happens to be the only Ecumenical Council whose attendees receive regular commemoration in the EOTC calendar — an event which happens on the ninth day of every Ethiopian month.¹⁴ Although such commemoration is often symbolized by the round number of 300 (ሠለስቱ: ምእት፡፡; *śālastu mā ʾət*), several texts and commentaries speak explicitly about the “318” (the number of bishops traditionally said to have attended the Council of Nicaea).¹⁵ Commenting on

⁸ More formally known as *Abba Sālāma* (አባ ሰላማ). See Gianfranco Fiaccadori, “Sālāma (Kāsate Bərhan).”

⁹ The consecration of Frumentius as bishop “took place, therefore, between 328, when Athanasius was elected to the See of St. Mark, and 335, when his first exile was enforced at the Council of Tyre,” Fiaccadori, “Sālāma (Kāsate Bərhan)” 486. See also Hamle 26 (August 02) in E. A. Wallis Budge, trans., *The Ethiopian Synaxarium*.

¹⁰ Fiaccadori, “Sālāma,” 487.

¹¹ See Stephanie L. Black, “‘In the Power of God Christ’: Greek Inscriptional Evidence for the Anti-Arian Theology of Ethiopia’s First Christian King.”

¹² Greek: ἀναφορά. Literally a ‘lifting up’, an *anaphora* is an essential prayer of thanksgiving that is chanted as the Eucharistic elements are consecrated, typically featuring some variation of these words: “Let us lift up our hearts” and “We lift them up to the Lord.” Although present in all Orthodox churches, the EOTC features more anaphorae than any other Orthodox tradition — arguably fourteen or even fifteen.

¹³ This was most probably composed in Gəʿəz in the fifteenth century by Giyorgis of Gaśsecha (ጊዮርጊስ ዘጋሠጃሄ). See Habtemichael Kidane, “Anaphoras,” 251–253; Getatchew Haile, “On the Authorship of Ethiopian Anaphoras,” 9–38.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Ralph Lee for emphasizing this to me during personal correspondence. It is also of note that this commemoration is not shared with the Coptic Church calendar, which is unusual. See Emmanuel Fritsch and Ugo Zanetti, “Calendar,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: A–C*, 668–672.

¹⁵ There is also an allusion to the 318 “mighty men” that Abraham raised up as an army in Genesis 14:14.

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the famous *Apocalypse of Weeks* in Ethiopic Enoch,¹⁶ the *Book of the Mysteries of Heaven and Earth* identifies the present age (“Week 8”) as “The Age of the 318 Orthodox Faithful, the sword is the Word of God, and the place signifies the churches built in the age of King Constantine.”¹⁷ However, the most pronounced discussion of Nicaea is found in the Ethiopian national epic, *Kəbrä Nāgāst* (ክብረ፡ ነገሥት፡; ‘The Glory of Kings’).¹⁸ Therein, the EOTC’s indigenous embodied theology is woven together in several ways that are explicitly traced back to Nicaea. This is demonstrated immediately in the first chapter:

ፍካሬ፡ ወዜና፡ ዘፑ፻፲ ወ፳፡ ርቱዓነ፡ ሃይማኖት፡ በእንተ፡ ከብር፡ ወዕበይ፡ ወተድላ፡ ዘከመ፡ ወሀበ፡
እግዚአብሔር፡ ለደቂቀ፡ አዳም፡ ወፊድ፡ፋደስ፡ ዘበእንተ፡ ዕበያ፡ ወከብራ፡ ለጽዮን፡ ታቦተ፡ ሕጉ፡
ለእግዚአብሔር፡ እንተ፡ ገባሪሃ፡ ወኬንያሃ፡ ለሊሁ፡ በውስተ፡ ጽርሐ፡ መቅደስ፡ እምቅድመ፡ ኸሉ፡
ፍጥረት፡ መላእክት፡ ወሰብኡ፡ እስመ፡ በኅብረት፡ ወበሥምረት፡ ወበዕሪና፡ ገብርዋ፡ አብ፡ ወወልድ፡
ወመንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ለጽዮን፡ ሰማያዊት፡ ለማኅደረ፡ ስብሐተሆሙ።

*Fəkare wāzena zā 318 ratuʾanā haymanot bāʾentā kəbr wāʾəbāy wātādəla
zākāmā wāhabā ʾƏgziʾabher lādäqiqä ʾAdam, wāfādfadāsā zābāʾəntā
ʾəbāya wākəbra lāšəyon tabotä həgu lä ʾƏgziʾabher ʾəntā gəbariha
wākenyaha lālihu bāwəstā šərha māqdāsu ʾəmqedmä kwəllu fəträt
məla ʾəkt wəsābə ʾ. ʾəsmā bāhəbrät wābäsəmrät wābā ʾərina gābrəwa ʾab
wāwäld wāMānfəs Qəddus lāšəyon sāmawayit lāmāhdärä səbhatihomu.*

The interpretation and announcement of the 318 Orthodox in Faith: Concerning the glory and greatness and dignity that God gave to the children of Adam, and especially concerning the greatness and glory of Zion — the Ark¹⁹ of the Law of God — which He Himself made and fashioned, within which is the chamber of His holiness from before the time of all creatures, angels, and humans. Because with unity, good will, and agreement, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit made the Heavenly Zion as a dwelling place for their glory.²⁰

¹⁶ Of course, a strong connection exists between Ethiopic Enoch and 1Enoch. Only the Gəʾəz text is complete, but the textual developments since its translation (probably in the fifth century AD), and the fact that the earliest extant manuscripts are nearly 1,000 years later than this translation date, mean that they cannot be understood as identical texts. For a further discussion of how the EOTC understands the concept of ‘canon’, see Bruk A. Asale, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Canon of the Scriptures: Neither Open nor Closed.”

¹⁷ Ralph Lee, “The Reception and Function of 1 Enoch in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition,” 316.

¹⁸ Notably, this was the opinion of Witakowski. See Witold Witakowski, “Nicea, Council Of,” 1176.

¹⁹ The Ark is a primary incarnational symbol in EOTC thought, and every EOTC church contains a *tabot* (ታቦተ) or “Ark” in place of the altar, which serves as a potent symbol of divine indwelling.

²⁰ Gəʾəz text taken from Carl Bezold, trans., *Kebra Nagast: Die Herrlichkeit der Könige nach*

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Further discussion of the many fascinating Nicene Christological terms²¹ used throughout the *Kəbrä Nəgəšt* is beyond the scope of this article, but the brief examples provided here more than suffice to demonstrate the strong commitment the EOTC has to Nicaea in her ongoing process of indigenous *Tāwəḥədo* Theologizing — especially in relation to ubiquitous Trinitarian formulae consequential of the recognition of the Son's full divinity.

Regarding my titular phrase “*Tāwəḥədo* Theologizing,” two separate ideas should be explained. First, the word *tāwəḥədo* is currently most associated with the EOTC's Christology, expressing the mysterious “union” of humanity and divinity in Christ. However, *tāwəḥədo* only became the dominant christological view at the Council of Boru Meda in 1878.²² Until very recently, it was universally accepted that *tāwəḥədo* was a key term used since the earliest composition of texts in Gə‘əz (ግዕዝ). This was based upon the impression that *tāwəḥədo* was used in the fifth century *Qerällos* (ቁርሎስ; Cyril)²³ to translate ἕνωσις (*hénōsis*), thus making it merely a “formulation inherited from Cyril of Alexandria.”²⁴ In the course of my own research, however, I have discovered that only the related word *dāmārä* (ደመረ)²⁵ and not *tāwəḥədo* is used in *Qerällos*. The semantic range of these terms is almost impossible to pin down from strict lexical assessment. Arguably, *dāmārä* carries the core sense of mathematical addition while *tāwəḥədo* is most connected to the sense of oneness. The

den Handschriften in Berlin, London, Oxford und Paris zum ersten Mal im Äthiopischen Urtext herausgegeben und mit deutscher Übersetzung versehen, § [1]’; my transliteration and translation.

²¹ Of particular interest is the unusual verb አትገለስ (*ätəgäsäs*, ‘I will become tangible’) — which seems to denounce gnostic or docetic understandings of the Incarnation — and the absence of the phrase ስብረ ህላዌ (*ḥəburä ḥəlawe*, ‘of the same nature’), which was used to translate ὁμοούσιος (*homoousios*) in the fifth century text *Qerällos* (ቁርሎስ) that is discussed further below. For more information see the forthcoming article from Ralph Lee, “The Council of the 318: The defining of an Epoch for the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwəḥədo* Church?”

²² Eloi Ficquet, “Boru Meda,” 609.

²³ It is also possible that this text was translated in the early sixth century. See Alessandro Bausi, “*Qerällos*,” 288.

²⁴ Tedros Abraha, “*Tāwəḥədo*,” 873. To be clear, it is true that EOTC *tāwəḥədo* christology is heavily dependent on Cyril, especially his words from the Formula of Reunion in 433: ἐκ δύο φύσεων (*ek dúo phýseōn*, ‘from two natures’). The only translation of *Qerällos* is that made by Weischer into German.

²⁵ This word means “insert, add, join, associate, unite, mix, mingle . . .” See Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge‘ez Classical Ethiopic: Ge‘ez-English / English-Ge‘ez: With an Index of the Semitic Roots*, 135. NB: The actual word used to translate ἕνωσις (*hénōsis*) is the form ትድምርት (*tədmərt*), which Leslau defines as “union, union of the two persons [sic] of Christ, communion, connection, mixture . . .” and which Dillmann describes as “an abstract noun derived from a Reflexive-Passive stem.” See August Dillmann, Carl Bezold, and James A. Crichton, *Ethiopic Grammar*, 234–235. See also Bernd Manuel Weischer, “Die christologische Terminologie des Cyrill von Alexandrien im Äthiopischen,” 733–741.

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triliteral root of *tāwahaḍo* is *ፀሐደ* (*wāḥādä*), meaning ‘to make one.’ Both terms continue to be used in abundance throughout the EOTC today, but it is often possible to discern that *dāmārä* is used for common things while *tāwahaḍo* is reserved for sacred matters.²⁶

Second, the term ‘theologizing’ as I use it here is rooted in the growing Missiological concept of *self-theologizing*. First coined by Paul Hiebert in 1985,²⁷ it has gained prominence among both Protestants and Roman Catholics. For instance, the Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans has engaged explicitly with the notion of self-theologizing.²⁸ Furthermore, Orthodox theologians such as Michael Oleksa²⁹ and Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos³⁰ have also written about highly similar concepts in relation to the needs for theological contextualization in local communities. Due to the largely *insulated* manner in which the EOTC developed its own unique characteristics,³¹ I use the phrase ‘*Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing’ as a shorthand to encapsulate the incredibly rich ways that the EOTC has “integrated,” “synthesized,” and “creatively incorporated”³² various spiritual and theological concepts so that they become fully “at home in the Ethiopian mind.”³³

Harmonious Tension

The West has long possessed a “preference for what is clear and certain over what is ambiguous or undecided; the preference for what is single, fixed, static and systematised, over what is multiple, fluid, moving and contingent.”³⁴ By contrast, the traditional *Tāwahaḍo* theologizing of the EOTC can be described as an approach that delights in variety and apparent contradiction. To borrow a phrase coined to describe the work of Ephrem the Syrian (who enjoys a prominent place in EOTC veneration) the fundamental approach of the EOTC

²⁶ This is especially observable in the *Books of the Monks*. See Calum Andrew Samuelson, “Expressions of *Theōsis* in Selected Ethiopic Monastic Literature,” 210, 243, 251, 262, 295.

²⁷ See Paul G. Hiebert, “The Fourth Self.” For further helpful discussion, see also Rochelle Cathcart and Mike Nicholls, “Self-Theology, Global Theology, and Missional Theology in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert.”

²⁸ E.g., Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, 60.

²⁹ E.g., Michael Oleksa, *Orthodox Alaska: A Theology of Mission*.

³⁰ E.g., Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*.

³¹ Numerous scholars have written extensively about this. Preeminent among them are Edward Ullendorff, Alois Grillmeier, Roger Cowley, Ephraim Isaac, and Yirga Woldeyes.

³² Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes, *Native Colonialism: Education and the Economy of Violence Against Traditions in Ethiopia*, 91–92, 80.

³³ Kirsten Stoffregen Pedersen, *Traditional Ethiopian Exegesis of the Book of Psalms*, 298.

³⁴ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 323.

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might be described as “Faith adoring the mystery”³⁵ (in contradistinction to “Faith seeking understanding”³⁶). A leading Ethiopian philosopher, Maimire Mennasemay, has described this approach as containing “internal tension,”³⁷ but I prefer to speak of *Harmonious Tension*. Related to this idea, Mennasemay says: “contradiction, understood theologically as ‘mystery’, is not opposed to ‘unity’ but is constitutive of its very unity.”³⁸ He adds: “matter and spirit, appearance and reality, are not mutually exclusive entities but exist in ‘unity’, in the *Tēwahedo* sense.”³⁹

Some have suggested that elements of mysterious contradiction or tension in the EOTC began all the way back with King Ezana, who may have allowed differing articulations of Nicaean Trinitarian theology on his famous trilingual stele in Aksum.⁴⁰ More likely, perhaps, is that this characteristic of the EOTC can be traced (through the Syriac tradition) all the way back to Rabbinical methods of biblical interpretation. The classic example illustrative of Harmonious Tension in the EOTC is the genre of *ʿAndəmta* (አንድምታ) commentary, which has preserved and cherished contradictory interpretations of Scripture⁴¹ in a way that has been compared to Jewish methods.⁴² The famous outstanding example of *ʿAndəmta* occurs at Revelation 6:2, which features 14 different glosses providing explanations for the “white horse of the apocalypse.”⁴³

Another important example of how the embrace of Harmonious Tension manifests itself within the EOTC is the principle of *Wax and Gold*,⁴⁴ especially

³⁵ See Sidney Griffith, *Faith Adoring the Mystery: Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian*.

³⁶ Latin: *Fides quarens intellectum*. This was the famous dictum of St Anselm of Canterbury (1033/1034–1109).

³⁷ Maimire Mennasemay, “Towards *Qiné* (ቅነ) Hermeneutics,” 19.

³⁸ Mennasemay, “Towards *Qiné* (ቅነ) Hermeneutics,” 19.

³⁹ Mennasemay, “Towards *Qiné* (ቅነ) Hermeneutics,” 30.

⁴⁰ See Black, “In the Power of God Christ.”

⁴¹ NB: Many other kinds of Ethiopic literature besides the Bible also features *ʿAndəmta* commentary, including Patristic, Monastic, and Liturgical texts.

⁴² Especially those in the Talmud. Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, 102.

⁴³ Roger W. Cowley, *The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of John in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, 229–232.

⁴⁴ ሰምና ወርቅ (*saṃana wərq*). This rich tradition involves a plain, external meaning (‘wax’) complementing and highlighting a concealed and deeper meaning (‘gold’). Sergew Gelaw and a team of scholars have identified eight broad methods used in *Wax and Gold*: grammatical constructions (especially double subjects); synonyms and words that carry special meanings; proper nouns that evoke particular events and passages from sacred texts; historical allusions; allusions to myths and legends; words or phrases quoted from sacred texts that encapsulate their meaning; words and phrases that parallel prophecy; and analogical words and phrases. See Sergew Gelaw, *የግዕዝ ቅኔ መንገዶች ከፍል ፩* [*The Paths of Gə ʾəz Qəne Part 1*], 30.

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as it is practiced within the extemporaneous oral poetic tradition known as *Qəne* (ቅኔ).⁴⁵ Therein, *Wax and Gold* plays with multiple layers of meaning simultaneously through elaborate ‘rules’ and methods so as to avoid both the divide of dualism and the confusion of mere conflation. Indeed, it is the very co-existence of opposing polarities that brings the deepest meaning in *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing.

A final note relating to this notion of Harmonious Tension concerns the classic apophatic approach (ἀπόφασις, *apóphasis*) to theological thinking or theologizing. There are, indeed, multiple similarities present here, such as the important idea of “discursive abstinence,”⁴⁶ which strongly describes the Ethiopian approach to theology. However, rather than being primarily an enterprise involving negation, *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing emphatically involves the joining of two or more apparently conflicting elements in order to produce something with rich meaning that strongly resists dilution or pragmatic simplification.

Embodied Practical Experience

The dimension of embodied (ሥጋዊ; *śagawi*) practical experience within *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing builds upon and is closely connected to the dimension of Harmonious Tension. For instance, the genre of *ʿAndāmta* commentary already highlighted, is largely dependent upon embodied and practical experience with the texts at hand. In his seminal work on *ʿAndāmta*, Roger Cowley insisted that its “rules” are best understood as “generalizations arising from actual engagement in exegetical debate, rather than expressions of a philosophical interpretative system.”⁴⁷ Many other examples of embodied theology can be found in the EOTC, and two short prayers will be presented to this end in the final section of this article.

More relevant to the thrust of this article are the embodied implications behind the intriguing evolution in recorded usage of the term *tāwahaḍo*. The reason I discovered the absence of the term *tāwahaḍo* in the text of *Qerällos* was because I was so impressed by its overwhelming usage in a much later and extremely influential Ethiopic monastic text known as the *Araḡawi Mañfāsawi* (አረጋዊ: መንፈሳዊ፣ ‘The Spiritual Elder’). This text is one of three *Books of the*

⁴⁵ For a good introductory article, see Daniel Assefa and Tekletsadik Belachew, “Ethiopian Qene (Traditional and Living Oral Poetry) as a Medium for Biblical Hermeneutics.”

⁴⁶ Serafim Seppälä, In *Speechless Ecstasy: Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*, 128.

⁴⁷ Roger W. Cowley, *Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation: A Study in Exegetical Tradition and Hermeneutics*, 374.

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*Monks*⁴⁸ traditionally studied as required training for every monk in Ethiopia and contains the highly mystical writings of three monks from the Syriac tradition—most prominently, John of Dalyatha (መልክሰ ዮሐንስ, *Yōhanān d-Dlīṭēh*). Although significant further research is still needed,⁴⁹ my findings⁵⁰ in the Ethiopic *Books of the Monks* strongly suggest that their usage of *tāwahādo* was the result of a thorough theological ‘synthesis’ by Ethiopian monks wrestling with the best way to articulate in Gə‘əz the highly mystical experiences described by the Syriac authors and observed in their own Ethiopian monastic communities. In other words, it appears increasingly likely that *tāwahādo* was first used in the EOTC to describe the embodied and practical experience of monastic communities and then later selected or ‘elevated’ as the best expression of the EOTC’s understanding of christology.⁵¹

The probability of this progression is strengthened by the absence of the term *tāwahādo* from several crucial Ethiopic texts that predate the translation of the *Books of the Monks* into Gə‘əz, including the *Dəggw’a* (ድግዳ),⁵² and perhaps most importantly, the Ethiopic biblical texts themselves. This point should not be underestimated, especially since the EOTC has possessed their own Gə‘əz translation of the Bible since the early fifth century (meaning they could develop their own unique expressions in Gə‘əz). The term *tāwahādo* features abundantly in the biblical *ʾAndāmṭa* commentary in Amharic precisely because it is a term representing gradual and thoughtful theological development that

⁴⁸ ሦስት፡ መጻሕፍተ፡ መካከላት፡ (Šostu Māṣahəftä Mänäkwäsat). The other two texts constituting this collection are ፊልክስዮስ (Filäksəyus), written by Dadisho of Qatar (Syriac: ܕܕܝܫܐ ܕܩܬܪ; *Dādīšō ʿQatrāyā*) and ማር፡ ዮሐንስ (Mar Yəshaq), written by Isaac the Syrian (ܝܫܥ ܕܩܬܪ; *Mār Ishāq d-Nimwē*).

⁴⁹ One of the most important factors to consider is the occurrence of *tāwahādo* in the *Book of Mystery* (መጽሐፈ፡ ምሥጢር፡; *Māṣəḥafä Məṣṭir*) by Giyorgis of Gaśšeča (ጊዮርጊስ ዘጋሠጫ) or Säglä. See Abba Hiruie Ermias, *The Book of Mystery: Māṣhafä Məṣṭir of Abba Giyorgis of Gaśəṣṣā*. My current speculation is that *tāwahādo* was popularized in the early fifteenth century by Giyorgis and then used for the translation of the *Araḡawi Mānfäṣawi* in 1524.

⁵⁰ See especially my “Expressions of *theosis* in Selected Ethiopic Monastic Literature,” chapter 6.

⁵¹ The interactions with and influence of the European Jesuits in Ethiopia during the sixteenth century is certainly another factor that propelled Ethiopian theologians to sharpen and clarify their Christology, and may have given new cause to regard ‘older’ Christological terms like *dāmārā* as somewhat inadequate, imprecise, or problematic.

⁵² More properly known as the *Dəggw’a* of St Yared (ድግዳ፡ ዘቅዱስ፡ ያፌድ). There is, in fact, a singular occurrence of *tāwahādo* in the *Dəggw’a*, but its appearance is easily identified as a much later addition. It is used in reference to Walātā Petros, who died in 1642, a date which is more than a century after the translation of the *Araḡawi Mānfäṣawi* into Gə‘əz. Recent research has verified the highly complex composition of the *Dəggw’a* in its current form, lending credence to this assessment. See Jonas Karlsson, “The Diachronic Development of the *Dəggw’a*: A Study of Texts and Manuscripts of Selected Ethiopic Antiphon Collections.”

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articulates complex ideas with words not found in the biblical texts. Ultimately, when *tāwahaḍo* was selected as the official expression of the EOTC's Christology at the Council of Boru Meda in 1878, it had gained substantial traction beyond strictly monastic communities because of its ability to articulate mystical union in ways that resonated with those who had tasted glimpses of it — whether ascetic, christological, or trinitarian.

In part, this represents an inverse development in christological and trinitarian thinking to that of many Chalcedonian traditions. Instead of receiving christological doctrine from major councils that was then explored and applied in mystical endeavours, the EOTC received and integrated beautiful language from mystics that was then explored and applied at major councils discussing christological and trinitarian doctrine. Nevertheless, this basic pattern is not entirely without similarity or precedent — especially in other related Oriental Orthodox traditions. One of the best examples on this point may be the highly 'practical' theology of Philoxenus of Mabbug, about whom David Michelson claims it can be said that practice led to and influenced formal doctrine.⁵³ Within Ethiopia today, the importance of embodied and practical experience of God is still cherished and prized in remarkable ways. Monks frequently mingle with and influence important social events, and the opinion of senior church scholars (known as *Arat* 'Ayn'⁵⁴) is highly regarded even if it seems to contradict established teachings or doctrines of the church. At the risk of seeming simplistic, it might be possible to describe the overarching EOTC perspective as insisting that evidence of Christlikeness within a person is ultimately what qualifies them to speak about God.⁵⁵

Examples and Potential for Ecumenical Fellowship

So, how exactly might these dimensions of *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing act as a guide for ecumenical fellowship today? First, *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing may be more fruitful in Majority World contexts where most Global Christians now live⁵⁶ because it is so deeply rooted in non-Western ways of thinking and less entrenched in logical and discursive paradigms. Thus, while several forms of Catholic and Protestant Christianity expend great energy in working to

⁵³ David A. Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug*, 3.

⁵⁴ አረጎ፡ ጥፂጎ፡, 'four eyes'. Contrary to the popular phrase in the West, this phrase in Ethiopia refers not to a wearer of eyeglasses, but rather a spiritual master who can see in all four 'directions' according to the categories of literature in the traditional schools of EOTC education.

⁵⁵ These can be assessed in various ways, including, for instance, the "markers of deification" (or perhaps 'of sanctification'). See Paul L. Gavriluk, Andrew Hofer, and Matthew Levering, "Introduction: Theses on Deification," 4–7.

⁵⁶ 28.5% in Africa + 15.8% in Asia + 23.4% in Latin America = 67.7% of total Christians. "Status of Global Christianity, 2025, in the Context of 1900–2050."

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‘inculturate’ theology that is often propositional, discursive, linear, or logical in non-Western contexts, the aspects of *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing briefly examined here may offer new ‘starting points’ that are far less encumbered by ill-fitting frameworks. Allen Yeh, among others, has written persuasively about how some of these dynamics do and should operate, involving the prioritization of relational values such as hospitality and honour while sidestepping Western emphases upon ideals such as efficiency and individualism.⁵⁷

Furthermore, when considering ecumenical efforts and the Majority World, it is not insignificant that Africa is now the continent with the most Christians. Although it is hardly straightforward to link Ethiopia with the rest of Africa simply because it is on the same continent,⁵⁸ it is nevertheless important to consider the strong similarities with other contexts in which cultures were not originally or traditionally shaped by abstract, hypothetical, or non-mysterious ways of thinking and being.

A second potential application for *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing involves interdisciplinary endeavours in the academy. Despite significant misunderstandings and even resistance in the past, it has become clear that academic institutions can benefit greatly by learning from Ethiopian language, culture, philosophy,⁵⁹ and theology.⁶⁰ Writing specifically about the intersection of theology and linguistics, the famous Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako insisted that: “Mother tongues and new idioms are crucial for gaining fresh insights into the doctrine of Christ.”⁶¹ Due to the irreducibility of languages to exactly equivalent semantic units, I take for granted the fact that an articulation of Cyril’s Christology in Greek,⁶² for instance, cannot be exactly or perfectly expressed in Gə‘əz without introducing or forsaking certain nuances or cultural assumptions.⁶³ If it is recognized that the tension existing between different

⁵⁷ E.g., see Allen Yeh and Tite Tiénou, eds., *Majority World Theologies: Theologizing From Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Ends of the Earth*; and Allen Yeh, “Majority World Theologies.”

⁵⁸ For instance, Niringiye (along with others) prefers to speak about four (or several) different Africas. Zac Niringiye, “On this Rock I will build my Church: Ecclesiology in Africa.” The four Africas mentioned in this context were: North Africa, the Horn of Africa, South Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

⁵⁹ For a groundbreaking text that has recently demonstrated the sophistication of indigenous African philosophical thought, see Zara Yaqob and Walda Heywat, *The Hatata Inquiries: Two Texts of Seventeenth-Century African Philosophy from Ethiopia about Reason, the Creator, and Our Ethical Responsibilities*.

⁶⁰ This is especially true in relation to post-colonial and African scholarship.

⁶¹ Kwame Bediako, “The Doctrine of Christ and the Significance of Vernacular Terminology,” 111.

⁶² E.g., ἐκ δύο φύσεων (*ek dúo phúseōn*, ‘from two natures’).

⁶³ One simple way to illustrate this point in the Ethiopian context is the most common word for God used by the EOTC: *ʾƏgzi ʾabher* (አግዚአብሔር). Like θεός (*theós*), evidence

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languages and Christian traditions can serve to expand rather than constrict conceptions of divine mystery in the *tāwahaḍo* sense of unity, ecumenical dialogue may be able to take a great step forward indeed.

A final potential application for *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing involves daily devotional prayers. Whether we like it or not, millions of Christians globally are increasingly using apps to guide their spiritual meditations, devotions, and prayers.⁶⁴ Many of these are already surprisingly ecumenical, employing various forms of *Lectio Divina*, the Jesuit *Examen*, and prayers from numerous church fathers and mystics of different traditions. I believe that the mystical⁶⁵ approach of *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing could work quite well in this regard, especially since most of the ‘mystical’ texts of the EOTC almost completely avoid doctrinal statements or discussion.⁶⁶

Demonstrative of this fact is a small Ethiopic prayer book called the *Wəddase ‘Amlak*,⁶⁷ which features prayers from Basil, Ephrem, Cyril, Athanasius, Pachomius, and others,⁶⁸ but heavily edited, abridged, and broken up into accessible units for individual days. Although not focused on christology (or any doctrinal apologetics, for that matter) several fascinating ideas relating to christology can nevertheless be detected, such as the theotic

demonstrates that ‘*Ḑgzi’abher*’ was used before the spread of Christianity in Ethiopia, meaning it had associations with the culture and customs of the time. From a plain linguistic perspective, ‘*Ḑgzi’abher*’ is a compound word consisting of ‘*Ḑgzi*’ (አግዚአ, ‘master, lord’) in construct with *bāher* (ብሔር, ‘region, land’), combined to mean “Lord of the land.” Several pre-seventeenth century manuscripts contain the term in this construct form. Furthermore, in the Ethiopic translation of the Septuagint (LXX; a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and NT from Greek, ‘*Ḑgzi’abher*’ is used to translate both *theos* and *kurios* (κύριος), demonstrating a certain measure of flexibility. Finally, a creative and indigenous ‘theological’ explanation has also developed around ‘*Ḑgzi’abher*’, which is only possible in Gə‘əz. This explanation exploits trinitarian convictions to decipher the mysterious way that each Person of the Trinity is “hidden” within the name ‘*Ḑgzi’abher*’: ‘*Ḑgzi*’ (አግዚአ, ‘lord’) is Christ, *āb* (አብ, ‘father’) is the Father, and *her* (ኤር, ‘good’) is the Holy Spirit. All these demonstrate different shades of meaning which ‘*Ḑgzi’abher*’ contains when compared with the *theos* inherited from Aristotle and Plato.

⁶⁴ Some of the more popular examples of these apps include: Hallow, Pray As You Go, Abide, and Lectio 365.

⁶⁵ ምስጢር (*məštīr*); μυστήριον (*mystērion*); ῥᾶζᾱ (‘*rāzā*). It must not be forgotten that ‘mystery’ is a deeply biblical word, used dozens of times by Paul alone, not to mention the occurrences elsewhere in the NT and in the LXX.

⁶⁶ This is famously true of Isaac the Syrian (of Nineveh), whose writings were translated and circulated very widely. See Sebastian P. Brock, “Isaac the Syrian.”

⁶⁷ ወዳሴ: አምላክ። (‘The Praise of God’). Like many other Ethiopic texts from this period, the evidence reveals that the *Wəddase ‘Amlak* was translated from an Arabic source. See Daniel Assefa, “Wəddase amlak.”

⁶⁸ It is especially noteworthy that these figures span different traditions and locations.

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implications of “mingling” and “adding” mentioned in the prayer *ገሐሙስ፤ ፶፭።* (*zāhāmus*, ‘Thursday,’⁶⁹ no. 55’):

እ ዘበከይከ ላዕለ አልዓዛር ወአውኅከክ እንብዓ ኅዘን ተወከፍ ምረረ ኅዘንየ ወአንብዕየ። ፈውስ ሕማምየ በሕማማቲክ። አጥዒ ቀኅልየ በቀኅላቲክ ቀስሕ ደምየ በደምክ ወደምር ውስተ ሥጋየ መዐዛ ሕይወት ዘቅዱስ ሥጋክ ከርቤ ዘሰተይክ እምነ ጽላእያን ያጥዕማ ለነፍስየ እንተ ሰትየት ሐሞተ እኩየ ሥጋክ ዘሰፍሐ ዲበ ዕፅ መስቀል ስፉሐ ይረስየ ለሕሊናየ ኅቤክ እስመ ናሁ ተመውአ እምነበ ጽላኢ ርእሰክ ዘጸነ ላዕለ ዕፅ መስቀል ያልዕሎ ለርእስየ ዘተዘብጡ እምነበ ርኩሳን እደዊክ ቅዱሳት እለ ተቀነሞ በቅንሞት እምነበ ከሀድያን ይምጥቃኒ ኅቤክ እምነበር እኩይ በከመ አሰፈውክ በአፉከ።

O zābākāykā la ‘älä ‘aL ‘azar wä ‘awhazkā ‘anbä ‘a ḥazən tāwākāf mārärä ḥazänäyā wä ‘anbä ‘äyā. Fāwəs ḥəməməyē bāḥəməmatikā. ‘Aṭ ‘i q’əsəlyä bāq’əsəlatikā tosəḥ dāmāyā bādāməkä wādāmər wəstā śəgayä mā ‘aza ḥəywät zāqəddus śəgakä kārbe zäsätäykä ‘əmnä śəla ‘əyan yaṭə ‘əma länäfsəyā ‘əntä sätəyät ḥamotä ‘əkuyä śəgakä zäsäfəḥa dibä ‘ədä mäsqäl səfuḥa yərəsəyo lāḥəlinayä ḥabekä ‘əsmä nahu tämāwə ‘a ‘eməḥabä śəla ‘i rə ‘əsəkä zäsänä la ‘älä ‘əda mäsqäl yəməṭəqani ḥabekä ‘əḡəbr ‘əkuy bākämä ‘asäfawəkä bā ‘afukä.

O You who wept for the sake of Lazarus and poured out tears of sadness, please [now] accept the bitterness of my sadness and tears. Cure my suffering with Your sufferings. Heal my wounds with Your wounds. Mingle (ቶስሕ) my blood with Your blood and add (ደምር; *dāmər*) to my flesh the perfume of Life from Your holy flesh. May the vinegar that You drank from those who hated You now sweeten my soul — my soul that drank the evil venom. May Your flesh that was spread out on the broad wood of the Cross draw my mind towards You. For behold, [my mind] was overcome with hatred. [Therefore], let Your head that was inclined on the wood of the Cross [now] lift up my head. Let Your holy hands that were plucked by defilement and transfixed with nails by the deniers [now] lift me up to You and [away] from doing evil; just as You promised Hope with Your mouth.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ The prayers of Thursday are attributed to አረጋዊ መንፈሳዊ ቅዱስ ዮሐንስ አፈ ወርቅ (*Araḡawi Mañfāsawi Qəduṣ Yoḥānəs Afä Wərq*, ‘The Spiritual Elder Saint John the Golden Mouth’), which initially seems to refer to John Chrysostom, but my research has highlighted several phrases and themes that strongly suggest the attribution actually refers (or originally referred) to John of Dalyatha, who is known in the EOTC Tradition as the *Araḡawi Mañfāsawi* or ‘Spiritual Elder’. See Calum Andrew Samuelson, “Expressions of *Theōsis* in Selected Ethiopic Monastic Literature,” Appendix G.

⁷⁰ ውዳሴ አምላክ። ዘሰባቱ ዕለታት፤ በግእዝና በአማርኛ [*Wəddasə ‘Amlak: Zäsäbatu ‘Īlätat (Bägə ‘əzənnä Bā ‘amarəña*), *Gə ‘əz* and Amharic: ‘*The Praise of God for Seven Days* (in *Gə ‘əz* and Amharic)’, ፫፻፷፫ [368]; my transliteration and translation.

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One can immediately notice the highly embodied language in this prayer, which apparently takes for granted that the person praying it is somehow actively experiencing the tears it speaks about. It is more difficult to detect the Harmonious Tension expressed in the space of this single and short prayer, but the hope of being lifted to Christ (and away from evil) nevertheless highlights the familiar paradoxical experience of Christians who catch glimpses of God's glory while surrounded by the sinfulness of the world — even if it is not a full-fledged 'mystical ascent' in the likes of advanced ascetics or St Paul.

Relatedly, and even more typical of the highly 'free'⁷¹ mystical writings of the various assembled authors of the *Wəddase 'Amlak*, one frequently encounters highly expressive and embodied language that places the supplicant in the position of notable female biblical characters. For instance, consider the following prayer, ሰሐሙስ፤ ፪፻፱፡፡ (*zāhāmus*, 'Thursday, #79'):

አ እግዚአባላ ኢየሱስ ክርስቶስ ሀበኒ ከመ እሕቅፍ አዕጋሪክ ንጹሐተ ወአጼኑ እምነሆን መዐዛ ሕይወት ወአርጎሶን በነጠንጣበ አዕይንትዩ ወእመዝምዞን በሰእርተ ርእስዩ ከመ ተበለኒ ሐር በሰላም ተጎድግ ለከ ኃጢአትክ ወስምክ ይኩን ጽሑፈ ውስተ መጽሐፈ ሕይወት ሀበኒ ዘንተ በዝንቱ ስምክ ቅዱስ። አ እግዚአባላ ኢየሱስ ክርስቶስ ረስዩ ለነፍስዩ ከመ ትኩን ለከ እንዚራ ወመሠንቆ ወትሰብክ በስምክ ውስተ ዐሠርቱ አህጉር ወትዘምር ለከ ቢቃል ጥዑም ወመዓርዓር ምስለ ጸዋትው ልዑላውያን።

O 'Egzi'äyā 'Iyäsus Krastos habäni kämä 'ehəqəf 'a 'əgarikä nəṣuhatä wä 'asenu 'emnehon mä 'aza həywät wä 'arəḥəson bänätāntabä 'a 'eynetəyā wä 'əmmāzməzon bäsə 'ərtä rə 'əsəyē kämä tābalāni ḥur bäsālam təḥadəgä läkä ḥəti'atəkä wəsəməkā yekun səḥufä wəstā məšḥafä həywät habänä zāntä bāzəntu səmekä qəddus. O 'Egzi'äyā 'Iyäsus Krastos rəsəya lānəfsəyā kämä təkun läkä 'ənzira wämäsānqo wätəsəbək bäsəməkā wəstā 'asärtu 'ahəgur wätəzəmər läkä bəqal tə'um wämä 'ar'ir məslä šəwatəw lə'ulawyan.

O my LORD Jesus Christ, allow that I might embrace Your pure feet. For I smell from them the [very] perfume of Life; I anoint them with tears from my eyes and wipe them with the hair of my head so that You will say to me, 'Go in peace. Your sins are forgiven and your name will be written in the Book of Life.' [Please] Give all of us this [Peace and Forgiveness], because of Your Holy name. O my LORD Jesus Christ, [tune] my soul so that it will be for You a harp and *mäsānqo*⁷² and proclaim Your name in the Ten Cities (Decapolis) and praise You with sweet sounds; sounds that are

⁷¹ It is not insignificant that the word *Gə'əz* (ግዕዝ) itself comes from the trilateral root meaning "become free." See Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary*, 175.

⁷² An ancient, one-stringed musical instrument of Ethiopia. Because no exact equivalent exists, this word has been preserved in transliteration.

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sweet like honey [in harmony] with the exclamations of the Exalted Ones.⁷³

Once again, this short prayer skirts controversial doctrine by focusing instead on spiritual actions that are universally uncomfortable. Even in ‘traditional’ cultures more accustomed with visceral bodily realities, smelling the feet of another person remains an uncomfortable act. And in the characteristic manner of *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing, it doesn’t seem to matter here that most men with short hair will be unable to actually wipe the feet of their Saviour! Such prayers are reflective of a much broader EOTC tradition that revels in the ‘negative space’ so vital for ecumenism by prioritizing the power of personal experience above the potential of cleverly curated litanies. Ultimately, the basic approach of *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing suggests that sincerely (even if imperfectly) praying the prayers (and perhaps singing the songs) of other traditions⁷⁴ (especially in thoroughly embodied, corporate settings) could be one of the best ways to foster ecumenical fellowship and greater love for our fellow Christians of all kinds around the world.

Conclusion

Having surveyed the foundations and development of ‘*tāwahaḍo*’ along with varied examples, several points should now be apparent. First, the EOTC’s manifest adherence to the Christological pronouncements of Nicaea (especially in her Trinitarian language) forms a foundation upon which all other Christian traditions may confidently position themselves as they consider her other characteristics that are imbued with so much ecumenical potential. Second, the impulse of *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing outlined here is pregnant with ecumenical energy insofar as it represents a theological approach that actively integrates disparate ideas (‘harmonious tension’) far more than rigorously vetting ideas in order to promote only the ‘cream of the crop’. Relatedly, *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing has been described here as something highly ‘practical’ but also as something that resists “pragmatic simplification”. With several examples in mind, perhaps it best now simply to say that *Tāwahaḍo* Theologizing enables the common Christian to express and locate their real experience of God in familiar terms without feeling the pressure (so often encountered in established forms of Christianity) to promulgate such terms as a rule to be followed by their fellow sibling in Christ. Finally, the highly embodied facets of spiritual training

⁷³ ውዳሴ አምላክ፡ ዘሰባቱ ዕለታት፤ በግላዝና በአማርኛ [Wəddase ‘Amlak: Zäsäbatu ‘Ēlätat (Bägə ‘əzənnä Bā‘amarəña), Gə‘əz and Amharic: ‘The Praise of God for Seven Days (in Gə‘əz and Amharic)’], ፬፻ [400]; my transliteration and translation.

⁷⁴ It should not be forgotten that the prayers of the Wəddase ‘Amlak themselves ultimately trace their lineage back to the works of Church Fathers in adjacent traditions who were theologizing in Greek, Syriac, and even Arabic.

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and practice that are emphasized throughout the communal teachings and life of the EOTC demonstrate how ecumenical fellowship might be anchored in universally uncomfortable dimensions of the human experience — even if such dimensions can never be completely flattened for every culture and must therefore perpetually persist within a “multiple, fluid, moving and contingent”⁷⁵ mosaic of Christian communion.

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⁷⁵ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, 323.

⁷⁶ Also available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285046329>

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Sunomilean Theology as a Model of Inter-Contextual Biblical Theology

Conceptual and Methodological Foundations for Theologizing with Others

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Abstract

The heightened glocalization of the contemporary world that has engendered the radical inter-contextuality of its societies and the irreversible interpenetration of local and global realities demands that Christian theologians, besides building aptitudes in constructing local theologies, should equally develop competence in constructing intercontextual theology. Drawing upon an eclectic methodology that merges narrative analysis, thematic analysis, and creative research, this article posits that engaging theology in a glocalized world requires the glocalization of theology. It proposes *sunomilean* theology (theology/theologizing with others) as a model of intercontextual biblical theologizing that fits today's glocal reality. Sunomilean theology is rooted in Peter's conversation with Cornelius in Acts 10:27 and finds profound expression in the Council of Jerusalem's narrative that Luke records in Acts 15. Its methodology leans on a three-step itinerary: (1) theological self-awareness, (2) other-theological awareness, and (3) intercontextual theological negotiation.

Résumé

La glocalisation accrue du monde contemporain, qui a engendré l'intercontextualité radicale de ses sociétés et l'interpénétration irréversible des réalités locales et mondiales, exige que les théologiens chrétiens, outre le développement de leurs aptitudes à construire des théologies locales, développent également leurs compétences en matière de construction de la théologie intercontextuelle. S'appuyant sur une méthodologie éclectique qui fusionne l'analyse narrative, l'analyse

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thématique et la recherche créative, cet article postule que s'engager dans la théologie dans un monde glocalisé nécessite la glocalisation de la théologie. Il propose la théologie *sunomiléenne* (la théologie/théologisation avec les autres) comme modèle de théologisation biblique intercontextuelle adapté à la réalité glocal d'aujourd'hui. La théologie sunomiléenne trouve ses racines dans la conversation entre Pierre et Corneille dans Actes 10:27 et trouve une expression profonde dans le récit du concile de Jérusalem que Luc rapporte dans Actes 15. Sa méthodologie s'appuie sur un itinéraire en trois étapes : (1) la conscience théologique de soi, (2) la conscience théologique de l'autre et (3) la négociation théologique intercontextuelle.

Resumo

A crescente glocalização do mundo contemporâneo, que gerou a intercontextualidade radical das suas sociedades e a interpenetração irreversível das realidades locais e globais, exige que os teólogos cristãos, além de desenvolverem as suas aptidões para construir teologias locais, desenvolvam também as suas competências na construção da teologia intercontextual. Baseando-se numa metodologia eclética que combina análise narrativa, análise temática e pesquisa criativa, este artigo postula que o envolvimento com a teologia num mundo glocalizado requer a glocalização da teologia. Ele propõe a teologia *sunomileana* (teologia/teologização com os outros) como um modelo de teologização bíblica intercontextual adaptado à realidade glocal de hoje. A teologia sunomileana tem as suas raízes na conversa entre Pedro e Cornélio em Atos 10:27 e encontra uma expressão profunda no relato do concílio de Jerusalém que Lucas relata em Atos 15. A sua metodologia baseia-se num itinerário em três etapas: (1) a consciência teológica de si mesmo, (2) a consciência teológica do outro e (3) a negociação teológica intercontextual.

Keywords

Intercontextual theology, theology with others, glocalization, Acts 15, Jerusalem Council

Mots-clés

Théologie intercontextuelle, théologie avec les autres, glocalisation, Actes 15, Concile de Jérusalem

Palavras-chave

Teologia intercontextual, teologia com os outros, glocalização, Atos 15, Concílio de Jerusalém

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Introduction

“How can we start with the many local and regional churches around the world and build a global fellowship — a fellowship that does ministry and theological reflections together . . . ?”¹ Veteran anthropologist and missiologist, Paul Hiebert, asked this question several years ago in connection to the need to adapt missions to a glocal world (a world characterized by the profound interpenetration of local and global realities) with the cortège of mutations it has triggered in world systems. The question highlights his concern to engage Christian ministry and theology, in this postmodern world of intensified intercontextual encounters, in ways that pay attention to both the local and global contexts. Fueled by such macro-social phenomena as mass migration, international exchange, global economy and business, globalization, top-notched information and communication technology, sophisticated transport systems, the accelerated respatialization of the world through the internet that has disembedded and reconfigured social geography, today’s world is interconnected in complex ways and has witnessed a lightning pluralization of its societies. Both at local and global levels, the contemporary world has become incurably intercontextual.

This heightened intercontextuality of the world begs that missions’ activists (theologians and practitioners) retune their approaches so that they engage contemporary glocal challenges. From a theological standpoint, this may entail constructing biblical theologies that reflect both local and global contexts. Hiebert suggests that creating networks that begin at local levels, developing global dialogues and partnerships to enhance fellowship and ministry, and engaging local and global theologies are important steps in responding to the globalization² of the world and the church.³ This article considers the need to develop intercontextual biblical theologies as a way of responding to challenges related to living in a world where global forces have an impact on local lives and vice versa. It draws from the conviction that engaging theology in a glocalised world requires the globalization of theology. Its purpose is (1) to lay the foundations for an intercontextual biblical theology that sharpens the ability to theologize with others, and (2) to propose a model for biblical theology/theologizing with others, namely, *sunomilean* theology.

¹ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions*, 178.

² The word globalization conflates the terms *global* and *local*. It involves the incorporation of a global reality (product, service, strategy, concept) into a local reality to adapt it to that specific setting. Therefore, what is glocal or glocalised includes intermeshing of universal/universalizing and local/particularizing properties.

³ Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 178.

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Conceptual Clarifications

I will begin by defining the key concepts of *contextual*, *intercontextual*, and *biblical theology* and introducing the term *sunomilean theology*.

Context

The etymology of the word *context* suggests the image of “weaving together.” From this perspective, context conveys the idea of weaving a phenomenon (an event, an occurrence, a text, etc.) together with its surrounding/setting to enable a greater understanding of that phenomenon. In this study, I define context as the setting (circumstances, environment, or background) in which a phenomenon occurs, manifest, or exist and, in the light of which, the phenomenon can be better understood. *Context* clarifies the meaning of a phenomenon and is essential for interpreting it. Considered primarily from a socio-anthropological perspective, *context* integrates several components.

1. The *cultural component* focuses on the cultural dimension of a context. It includes (although is not limited to) the worldviews, philosophical assumptions, belief systems, values, and practices of a social group.
2. The *social component* emphasizes a society and its organization, comprising such features as social structures, social relationships, social geography, and social dynamics which undergird life in a social group, impact individual/group behavior, and conditions their interpretation of social reality.
3. The *historical component* highlights the history of a context, encompassing past events, conditions, and development that influence the present and shape the future of a social group. Understanding how these features influence a present situation, event, or sociocultural phenomena is vital in interpreting these phenomena.
4. The *situational component* is the specific situation that forms the immediate setting of an occurrence, phenomenon, interaction, etc. It embraces notions such as time, location, immediate environment, and others.
5. The *physical component* is the tangible geographical environment that surrounds an event, interaction, or a sociocultural phenomenon. More than often recognized, physical geographical features that constitute the setting of a phenomenon/situation greatly contribute to a fuller understanding of that phenomenon/situation.
6. *Personal and communal experience* are the daily experiences

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of a social group or individuals within a social group and how these experiences shape the social identity, collective consciousness, and *weltanschauungen*⁴ of the people of a specific context.

7. *Social location* describes the multiple factors that outline an individual's place/position within a social structure based on his or her social identity and the resulting privileges/disadvantages. Social location combines social markers such as ethnicity, race, gender, social class, geographical location, age, education, ability, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Coming to grips with social location allows for an analysis of how the above factors may tailor the social dynamics, experiences, and perspectives of an individual or a social group.
8. *Social change* portrays the alteration over a period of time of social mechanisms (social organization, dynamics, interactions and relationships) within a social structure that engenders more or less visible social mutations. These mutations may occur at the level of social institutions, social patterns, social behaviors, or social relations. Understanding these changes is vital in understanding context.

These components underline the complexity and inclusiveness of context as each intersect and interplay in the constitution of context. To understand and interpret the reality of a social group, each of these must be studied.

We thus see that that context is larger than culture. Culture is only an aspect of context. As a larger and more comprehensive reality, context encompasses culture. *Culture* and *context* are not synonyms. Similarly, *intercontextual* and *intercultural* are likewise not synonymous, although these concepts may overlap.

Intercontextual

While *contextual* highlights what is associated with a *context*, *intercontextual* indicates what occurs in the *intersection between two or multiple contexts*. The prefix *inter-* provides the term an interactional and co-constructional force. The former highlights the reciprocity of action and influence that various contexts have on each other, while the latter emphasizes the collaborative negotiation and construction of meaning that occurs in the convergence of contexts. The prefix *inter-* communicates the notion of *conjunctive in-betweenness*; that is, the ability to intermediate, connect,

⁴ German: literally 'world-perception'. This term, now part of the English lexicon, refers to the worldview or particular philosophy of a given group or individual.

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consociate, or bring distinct phenomena/realities together in an interactive synergy. This means that intercontextuality accentuates mutuality, interconnectedness, sharing, reciprocity, and consociation. It is situated at the confluence of contexts and finds its place in the interaction between self and otherness.

To help explain the concepts at the heart of intercontextuality, I have coined three portmanteaus: *betweenomenon*, *betweenitivity*, and *interism*. The first term, *betweenomenon*, combines ‘between’ and ‘phenomenon’. It describes what exists or is produced between two or more phenomena. A *betweenomenon* is an in-between reality — a phenomenon situated at the junction of two or more realities. *Betweenitivity* brings together the terms ‘between’ and ‘activity’. It expresses the notion of intervallic activity; the back-and-forth movement that occurs in a space between two or more realities. The third term merges the prefix *inter-* with the suffix *-ism*. *Active interism* describes the ability to understand, move, think or live in intercontextual spaces. It presupposes the prior development of an integrative or multi/meta-contextual self, that is, a self that has integrated the ability to accommodate and function in multiple contexts. This ability can also be thought of as *dynamic intervalism*.

Sunomilean Theology

I recently coined the term sunomilean from the Greek verb συνομιλέω (*sunomilēō*). The term compounds the preposition συν (*sun*, ‘with’) with the verb ὁμιλέω (*homilēō*, ‘I converse, talk’) and can be defined as “I converse with, I talk with, I discuss, I hold a conversation with, or I am in company with.”⁵ In this light, *sunomileo* is not talking *to* others, talking *about* others, or talking *for* others. Rather, it is talking *with* others, talking *together with* others, or *conversing with* them. While talking to others is *unidirectional/informative speech*, talking about others is *otherizing speech* (speech about others; often, without those others), and talking for others is *substitutional speech*, talking with others is *conversational, polylogical, heteroglossic, and multidirectional speech*. Sunomilean discourse thus emphasizes mutuality, reciprocity, and correlation in communication.

Sunomilēō occurs in the NT only in Acts 10:27. The verse is niched in a larger narrative that stretches from Acts 10:1 to Acts 10:48. This narrative recounts the story of the conversion to Christ of a Roman centurion, Cornelius, alongside his household through the ministry of Peter. Prior to this conversion, Luke indicates that, through the “Vision of a Sheet and Animals” (Acts 10:9-16), Peter underwent a conversion from his ethnocentrism — what Darrell Whiteman calls Peter’s “second conversion,” to prepare him for cross-cultural

⁵ William D. Mounce, “συνομιλέω.” Cp. BDAG, s.v. συνομιλέω.

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mission.⁶ Acts 10: 27 specifically highlights the conversation that occurred between Peter (a Hebrew) and Cornelius (a Gentile) when they met around the proper worship of God. Following Cornelius' attempt to worship Peter as documented in Acts 10:26, Peter seeks to form the right understanding (theology) about how to accurately worship God and how God relates with God's servants. Although, by prostrating to Peter to worship him, Cornelius expresses the fear of God and his reverence to Peter as God's servant, by the same token, he mistakes God's messenger for the messenger's God. This is understandable given the pagan background of Cornelius. It is this pagan atavism that, Peter, in an engaging talk with Cornelius, seeks to redress.

In this God-orchestrated encounter of people from different contexts, Peter and Cornelius are brought together in a discussion about God and the worship of God. This generates an inter-ethnic, intercultural, interreligious, or, better still, an *intercontextual* conversation that occurs within a framework of respect and mutual understanding. The episode clearly illustrates the essence of a sunomilean approach to theology.⁷ Sunomilean theology is theology with others. It is dialogic, polylogic or multidirectional theology. It is theologizing that takes into consideration otherness. Sunomilean theology is *conversational theology*. It is theology in which people of different theological leanings can be engaged in a constructive talk/conversation. It is theology that captures, reflects, and represents the voices of many.

Theological Knowledge as a Situated, Social, and Contextual Production

Feminist epistemologists, social epistemologists, and epistemic contextualists argue that knowledge is situated, socially constructed, and contextually produced. Knowledge is situated because it reflects the situation of a cognizing subject — the knower; “situatedness influences knowers’ access to information and the terms in which they represent what they know.”⁸ In this sense, “a knower is not just a dispassionate inquirer but one situated to reflect within a given cognitive context which determines the knowing outcome.”⁹ Knowledge is socially constructed in that it is embedded in a social setting and reflects that setting. Factors associated with a social environment have the potential to shape the knowledge production and attribution of epistemic agents from that environment. Thus, a “society’s participation in knowledge

⁶ Darrell L. Whiteman, “The Conversion of a Missionary: A Missiological Study of Acts 10,” 19–21.

⁷ See also the sunomilean theologizing in the conversations between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7–26) and between Jesus and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–32).

⁸ Elisabeth Anderson, “Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science.”

⁹ Adekunle Ibrahim, “Introduction to Epistemology,” 27.

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generation [is] inevitable.”¹⁰ Knowledge is also rooted in a context. Contextualists stress this contextual anchorage of epistemic activities. They posit that knowers are, of necessity, situated/localized cognizers since their knowledge, to a great extent, mirrors the context in which they live. Therefore, knowledge production cannot be envisaged in abstraction from the context to which an epistemic agent belongs. Duncan Pritchard’s contention that “knowledge is a highly context-sensitive notion”¹¹ finds relevance here. It follows that knowledge is contextual, anchored in a social environment, and reflects a situational reality.

As a system of knowledge, theology is a social construction that is situated and embedded in context. This makes theology socially produced, situated, diverse, and polycentric. Theology is multisite and multiplistic. In this light, theology is fundamentally contextual, each theology is context-based, and there is a pluriversality of contextual theologies rather than just a single theology. Contextual theologians such as Arthur Glasser, Charles Kraft, Dean Gilliland, Paul Hiebert, Charles Van Engen, David Hesselgrave, R. Daniel Shaw, Edgard J. Ellison, Stephen Bevans, Robert Schreiter, and Fohle Lygunda li-M have correctly emphasized the central place of a contextual discourse in Christian theologizing. It is only through theological reflections that are *truly* informed by the realities of their contexts and allows members of specific contexts to encounter God in contextually relevant ways that Christ’s Lordship will be made intelligible to all peoples in all nations.

Limitations of Contextual Theology

Although contextual theology is vital, as it enables contextually relevant and intelligible reflections on God in the Scriptures, this approach to theology presents several limitations that are organically tied to its situatedness. Although some contextual theologies are opened to other forms of theologies, narrow contextual theology¹² may lead to several pitfalls if its promoters are not conscious that contextual knowledge in general, by reason of its context-rootedness, is bound to a specific time and space. This is what epistemic invariantists have often emphasized. Following are some pitfalls of a narrow contextual theological discourse:

1. *The standardization of contextual theology.*
When theology overly focuses on a specific context, it

¹⁰ Yigal Godler, Zvi Reich, and Miller Boaz, “Social Epistemology as a New Paradigm for Journalism and Media Studies,” 213.

¹¹ Duncan Pritchard, *What Is This Thing Called Knowledge?*, 177.

¹² By *narrow contextual theology*, I mean contextual theology that is not aware of other contextual theologies and does not care about theological universals.

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generally tends to only emphasize contextual specifics. A rigid fixation with contextual specifics may result in the standardization of one's contextual theology and its recognition as the measure of truth. This standardization harbors in itself the seed for relativizing Christian theology, reducing it to local expressions only, and to blur core theological expressions that apply universally.

2. *The fragmentation of theology.*

The logical consequence of reducing Christian theology to its local expressions only is the dismembering of theology. This dismembering allows for an undue dispersivity of theology, making it difficult to maintain consistent theological standards across various contexts. This has the potential of fragmenting the global church for the sake of particularistic emphases.

3. *Theological isolationism.*

When contextual theology is narrowly constructed and defined, it may result in rigid theological identitarian closure, theological ghettoization, or theological isletism (theological isolation that is driven by a desire to preserve a specific theological identity). Contextual theology that is enamored by itself and fails to look beyond itself runs the risk of isolating its promoters and consumers from the broader Christian community, leading to a deficient, if not total absence of, dialogue and collaboration between various contextual expressions of the faith.

4. *A lack of theological comprehensiveness.*

Contextual theological reflections, due to their inherent context anchorage, do not capture the whole picture of biblical theology. Contextual theology is like one of the many facets of a diamond. Although it reflects in a real sense the nature of a diamond, it nevertheless does not render a full depiction of the multifacetedness and multiperspectivity of that diamond.¹³

These limitations of narrow contextual theologizing accentuate the need to maintain an intentional equilibrium between contextual and global expressions of the Christian faith. They highlight the need for an intercontextual theology.

¹³ Editors' note: Ref. Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, eds., *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond: Christianity as a Universal Faith — Essays in Honour of Kwame Bediako*, Regnum Studies in Global Christianity (Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana: Regnum Africa, 2014).

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Introducing Contextual Theology

Intercontextual theology is constructed considering theological perspectives from several contexts. It is developed at the point of convergence of various contextual theological expressions. Intercontextual Christian theology may bring together Christian theologizing from different geographical spheres (e.g., Africa, Asia, Europe), Christian traditions (e.g., Evangelicals, Ecumenicals), theological perspectives (e.g., Arminianism, Calvinism), or social locations (e.g., Black theology, Feminist theology) in a constructive theological conversation. *Constructive* implies that, although intercontextual theologizing may be confrontational — that is, it may become a site of tension and contestation — it is carried out in the framework of Christian fellowship, its ultimate finality being that of common edification and socioconstructivism. By allowing theologians to bring their various contextual understanding of God in the Scriptures, intercontextual theology provides them with a “space to notice the resonances, tensions, weaknesses, and benefits of each perspective.”¹⁴ It also sharpens their ability to present their theological stance, discuss their theological identities and that of others, meaningfully debate, learn from others, and collaborate in view of creating a greater kingdom synergy. In this light, intercontextual theology is a *betweenomenon* that results from a theological *betweenitivity* from several contexts.

Intercontextual theology is a relatively new field. As a result, there is a scarcity of material dealing specifically with the subject.¹⁵ An internet search for written resources on the topic on 18 November 2024 yielded few results. Most of these were not academic articles on the subject but introductory statements from theological institutions that either offer intercontextual theological courses or schools whose educational philosophy is shaped by an intercontextual theological perspective. A search of Google Scholar for the phrase “intertextual theology” for twentieth century (1901–2000) publications found only a single article in 1989 using the term. A similar search for 2001–2010 found eight results whereas the next decade (2011–2020) found 47 results. Two books which

¹⁴ Maher, “The Opportunity of Inter-Contextual Theology.”

¹⁵ There are a growing number of texts on *intercultural theology*, which, though an older concept, may be considered as a subcategory of *intercontextual theology*. But while culture is a key component of context, context is more than culture.

Editors’ note: see especially Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn*, Research in Contemporary Religion 25 (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017) and Henning Wrogemann’s three-volume *Intercultural Theology* — vol. 1: *Intercultural Hermeneutics*; vol. 2: *Theologies of Mission*; vol. 3: *A Theology of Interreligious Relations* — Missiological Engagements (Downers Grove, Illinois, USA: IVP Academic, 2024), first published in German as *Lehrbuch Interkulturelle Theologie/Missionswissenschaft* in 2012. Sadly, minority world publications are often inaccessible to those of us here in Africa.

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explicitly address intercontextual theology have been published since 2000: the edited volume, *Plurality, Power, and Mission: Intercontextual Theological Explorations on the Role of Religion in the New Millennium* (2000) and Amy Chilton's *Theology in Many Voices: Baptist Vision and Intercontextual Practices* (2023).

Most resources I found that discuss intercontextual theology, although not with that terminology, come predominantly from contextual theologians or theologians with an intercultural leaning. For example, in 1996 Justin S. Ukpong proposed “inculturation theology” not as a specific theological discipline but as a “hermeneutical process in theologizing that cuts across all theological disciplines, including Biblical exegesis.”¹⁶ In 2002, Stephen Bevans, an ardent advocate of contextual theology, recognized that in constructing theology, Christian theologians should learn from others synchronically (from other cultures) and diachronically (from history).¹⁷ In 2004, Hans de Wit propounded the concept of “intercultural hermeneutics” as an attempt to relate the inculturation of biblical stories in one culture with their inculturation in another culture, reminding “contextual hermeneutics of the presence of ‘other’ ‘local’ contexts.”¹⁸ In 2007, Timothy Tennent emphasized that, since Christianity has truly become a global faith, all Christian theology should be “done with a greater sensitivity to its universal and particular aspects.”¹⁹ According to him, these aspects should be kept in constant tension in theological activities so that Christian theology remains both interdisciplinary and transcultural. More recently, in 2023 Fohle Lygunda Li-M prescribed a “bridge paradigm” as a way of creating a space for dialogue between local/contextual theologies in Africa that are “characterized by divergent cultural and religious realities.”²⁰

¹⁶ Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole, “Rise of intercultural Biblical exegesis in Africa,” 1350; quoting Justin S. Ukpong, “The parable of the shrewd manager (Lk 16:1–13): An essay in the Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutic,” *Semeia* 73 (1996): 189–210; Loba-Mkole does not provide a page number for the quoted text.

¹⁷ Stephen S. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Culture*, 5.

¹⁸ Gerald O. West, “Locating ‘Contextual Bible Study’ within Biblical Liberation Hermeneutics and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics,” 2–3; citing Hans de Wit, “Intercultural Bible reading and hermeneutics,” chapter 26 in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, edited by Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker, Marleen Kool, and Daniel Schipani, 477–392 (Amsterdam: Institute of Mennonite Studies, Vrije Universiteit, 2004), 481.

¹⁹ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Affecting the Way Think about and Discuss Theology*, 12.

²⁰ Fohle Lygunda Li-M, *Contextualisation Aujourd’hui*, 105; my translation. See also his summary article, “De la contextualisation à la contextualisation de la théologie en Afrique: Sens, portée et précisions de nouveaux appels.”

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Alongside the relative scarcity of materials on intercontextual theology, there is also a scarcity of well-elaborated methods/models for doing intercontextual theology. A model that has not been fully developed yet that may be termed *intercontextual hermeneutics* was hinted at by Mark Allen Powell in *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew* (2007). In chapter 2, he recounts how he asked Christians from three different contexts — North America, Russia, and Tanzania — to describe how they understood the parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11–32). It is amazing how their reading of the same texts differed based on the contextual lenses from which they were read. This model consists, in a Bible study, in allowing people of different contexts to consider the same Bible text and share their understanding of the text to uncover how various contextual factors shape what they see in the text. Anne Maher has recommended a similar method for teaching intercontextual theology at Tabor College in Millswood, South Australia, Australia.²¹ The Insituut voor Intercontextuele Theologie (Dutch: ‘Institute for Intercontextual Theology’) in Apeldoorn, The Netherlands, upholds the same approach. They advocate that, in intercontextual theology, “You study the Bible together with others and discuss what the text means in an ecclesiastical, cultural and social context.”²²

It is owing to the scarcity of material and the lack of fully blown models for understanding and doing intercontextual theology that this paper is written. I propose to lay conceptual foundations for intercontextual theologizing and to draft a biblical model for intercontextual theology, namely, the *sunomilean* model of theology.

Sunomilean Theology: NT Illustration, Methodology, Conceptual Components, Outcomes, and Rationale

This section explores one NT instance of sunomilean theologizing (Acts 15:1–29) and examines its conceptual components and rationale.

NT Illustration (Acts 15:1–29)

Acts 15: 1–31 narrates the unfolding of the Jerusalem Council. The Council is “pivotal to the body and theology of Acts” as the passage tackles significant practical issue associated to the nature of salvation (does it result from the Law, grace or both?) and the integration of Gentile Christians into what had been, up to that time, essentially a body of Jewish believers.²³ According to Timothy Wiarda, professor of New Testament at Singapore Bible College, the “Council

²¹ Anne Maher, “The Opportunity of Inter-Contextual Theology.”

²² Institute for Intercontextual Theology, “Study Intercontextual Theology that Suits You Best.”

²³ Michael Mahan, “A Narrative Analysis of the Jerusalem Council Discourses: Table Fellowship and the Implicit Theology of Salvation,” 40.

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serves as paradigm and precedent for a number of proposals concerning the theologian's task."²⁴ He upholds that the Council models and sets the precedence for the theological task in five ways:

1. it is a model for the task of contextualization,
2. it is model for Spirit-led community interpretation of Scripture,
3. it is a model for a bimodal authority structure,
4. it is a model of canonical conversations,²⁵ and
5. it sets the precedent for theological decision-making based on a concept of progressive revelation.²⁶

In this study, I explore the Jerusalem Council as a model of canonical conversations.

The theological reflections that occur at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:1-29 are a vivid illustration of sunomilean theology as it involves people of different Christian contexts talking with each other in a bid to draft a theological discourse on salvation that applies to and beyond their various contexts. According to Acts 15:2, what prompted the Council was an attempt by Judeo-Christians to superimpose their law-driven contextual understanding of salvation to Christians of Gentile background. The Judeo-Christians advocated that for Gentile Christians to be saved, they needed to undergo circumcision in accordance with the Mosaic customs and laws. Their advocacy is recorded twice in chapter 15 (vv. 1 and 5), thereby highlighting its importance in the minds of these believers. Luke records in Acts 15:2 that Paul and Barnabas, who vehemently opposed this proselytizing position,²⁷ engaged in a sharp clash with the Judaizers. This clash suggests that the meeting of theological perspectives from different contexts could become a site of heated and intense contestation. It is this theological tussle that provoked the organization of the Council of Jerusalem. Its purpose was to ameliorate tensions between Gentile and Jewish Christians in the nascent and growing Christian movement, prevent any schism, find common ground that would allow for peaceful cohabitation between them, and draft a trans-contextual theology that would be applicable beyond various

²⁴ Timothy Wiarda, "The Jerusalem Council and the Theological Task," 233.

²⁵ Wiarda describes canonical conversation as a "theological plurality" (theological diversity) or an "intramural debate" (a debate that occurs within the wall of the canons of Scripture) in which there is much common ground among NT actors involved in a discussion but there is also the presence of areas of disagreement; "The Jerusalem Council," 240.

²⁶ Wiarda, "The Jerusalem Council," 233–242.

²⁷ For the crucial distinction between *proselytization*, which absolutizes one's own contextual theology and forbids contextualized theologizing for other contexts, and *conversion*, which allows both contextual and intercontextual theologizing, see Andrew F. Walls, "Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church."

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local contexts.

To participate in the Jerusalem discussions, the church of Antioch chose Paul and Barnabbas alongside other members of the church. Among them was Silas, a follower of Jesus of Hellenistic Jewish origin (Acts 15:22). Upon arrival in Jerusalem, they engaged in deliberations with the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem to examine the claim of Judaizers that Gentile believers needed circumcision to be saved (vv. 1 and 7). It is worth noting, before further exploration of Luke's narration in this chapter, that the theological conversation that goes on in Acts 15 is both *interethnic* (Jews and Gentiles — i.e., non-Jews — are involved), *intercultural* (Jews and Greeks are involved; 'Greek' is here a cultural term), and *inter-ideological* (Law-free perspective of the gospel championed by Paul and his team and the Law-based view of the gospel sponsored by Judaizers are included).

At least three textual facts of exegetical import found in Acts 15:6–7a are strategic in understanding the prerequisites, nature, and purpose of the intercontextual theological polylogue that unfolds at this Council and in shedding light on dynamics of sunomilean theology. The first fact is associated with Luke's use in verse 6 of συνάγω (*sunágō*, 'to assemble, convene, gather together, join together') in relation to the apostle and elders who gathered to solve the theological divergence that opposed Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. This fact emphasizes the need for talks where intercontextual theological divergences occur. The second fact is his use of the phrase ἰδεῖν περὶ τοῦ λόγου τούτου (*idein peri tou logou toutou*), which may be translated "to see into this matter," "to deliberate," or "to examine." The phrase clarifies the purpose of the gathering. Finally, there is his use of πολλῆς ζητήσεως (*pollēs zētēseōs*) which may be rendered as "much discussion," "much debate," "much mutual questioning," or "much disputation." (Note that Luke first used the word *zētēseōs* in 15:2). The presence of this locution highlights both the duration and amount of deliberations that went on.

It follows that sunomilean theology should ideally begin with an intentional desire to gather various contextual perspectives in a bid to engage them in constructive deliberations. These talks may involve much discussion, mutual questioning, or debates. The conversations are intended to enable a clearer and deeper understanding of various contextual perspectives, so that the contextually transversal theology that would emerge reflects various local positions. (It is worth mentioning that deliberations in sunomilean theology, although sensitive to other theological perspectives, are anchored in God's word as deliberators see Scriptures as authoritative and normative for matters regarding Christian faith and doctrines.)

The itinerary of the deliberations is recorded between verses 7b and 29. The itinerary roughly follows four steps. First, it starts with introductory words from

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Peter (vv. 7–11). Peter’s opening words affirm a theological postulation from the Judeo-Christians given that Peter was the chief representative of disciples from this context. Second, disciples of Gentile background are given the latitude to present and defend their theological stance through their representatives, Paul and Barnabas (v. 12). Third, the theological voices of disciples of Jewish background is heard again as James, a robust representative of Judeo-Christianity, is allowed to speak. His intervention also serves as a conclusive note to the deliberations (vv. 13–21). Finally, after sustained talks that alternate between the theological stances of Judeo-Christians and Gentile Christians, deliberators reach a consensus and formulate theological postulates that would be applied in various local churches of Gentile territories that generally comprised both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 22–29). Luke indicates in verse 22 that this decision that came from apostles and elders reflected various theological perspectives involved in deliberations. His use in verse 25 of the phrase ἔδοξεν ἡμῖν γενομένοις ὁμοθυμαδὸν (*édoksen humin genomenois homothumadòn*, lit., ‘it seemed good to us, having-become of-one-mind / having-come together-with-one-accord’) attests to the fruitfulness of the talks that resulted in creating a common ground amongst various theological factions involved in the Jerusalem talks. It marks an intersection between holders of various contextual perspectives.

It is important to highlight some important facts regarding the alternation of speaking, listening, and silence in the unfolding of the deliberations in Acts 15 since these facts shed light on sunomilean theology. After Peter’s address, the whole assembly keeps quiet (σιγάω / *sigáō*) and listens (ἀκούω / *akouō*) to Paul and Barnabas speak (v. 12). Of note is the fact the Greek word *akouō* means much more than hearing: it is hearing to understand, perceive the sense of, consider, or attend attentively to what is said. After Paul and Barnabas ceased talking (*sigáō*), James stood up and spoke (v. 13). Immediately as James initiated speech, he enjoined the assembly as follows: ἀκούσατέ μου (*akousate moi*; note the imperative form of *akouō*), which may be translated “hear me” or “listen to me.” This alternation of speech, listening (to understand), and silence that occurs severally between verses 12 and 13 shows that Luke gives these attributes a strategic place in the intercontextual theological deliberations that held at the Council of Jerusalem.

From the analysis above, a three-dimensional sequence is observable in the intercontextual discussions that unfolded in Acts 15.

1. *Representatives of each group presented their theological position(s).*

Their theological discourse anchored in their perception of salvation. The fact that they defended their theological position presupposes that they were aware of their theological

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identity and articulated it in intelligible ways for others to understand.

2. *Representatives of each group allowed other groups to express their theological position(s).*

This occurred in two ways. First, they kept quiet, giving other groups the latitude to express their theological position(s). This is obvious in Luke's multiple use of *sigáō* in the text. Second, they listened. Luke also emphasizes this dimension in his recurrent use of *akouō*. It follows that, learning to be quiet and actively listen to others is foundational in sunomilean theology.

3. *All the groups agreed on a transversal theological discourse that would be applicable beyond various immediate contexts.* They started from their contexts but transcended them. They moved beyond their immediate contexts by outlining and agreeing on theological universals. They move their discourse from extremities/poles to a center, thereby favoring consensus convergence and the idea of a conversation.

Methodology

Based on the above analysis of the methodological sequence of theological deliberations on salvation at the Council of Jerusalem, I propose three essential pillars for a methodology of sunomilean theology:

1. *Theological self-awareness/self-reflexivity*
emphasizes the discovery/promotion of one's theology (content, nature, method, outcomes). It deals with auto-theologizing and addresses delimited theological issues in specific contextual areas. It is at this level that all theologians need to engage contextual theology as it promotes the uncovering of one's own theological identity and the construction of a theology that reflects the realities of a specific context.
2. *Other-theological awareness*
involves the discovery of others' theology. Theologians need to open up to others' contextual theologies. This openness arises from curiosity and the need of discovering others' theological perspectives. Other-theological awareness is *discovery or exploratory theology*. It enables the discovery of the theological identity of others.
3. *Intercontextual theological negotiation*
integrates a move towards other theologies to theologize with their promoters. I describe this as *inter-theologism*. It may

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involve outlining recognizable transversal thematic patterns in specific contextual theologies as well as underlining their differences. It is motivated by a desire to create a synergy of difference and to enhance the sense of transvaluation, the enrichment that results from an encounter with otherness. This move enables the delineation of both theological specifics/particulars and theological universals. To engage inter-theologism requires that theologians gain a good knowledge of a variety of present-day contextual theologies and develop skill in navigating their way inter-contextually. In other words, they need to build aptitudes in active interism. It is at this level that intercontextual theologies can be constructed.²⁸

From this methodological itinerary, sunomilean theology allows three foundational theological expressions. First, it allows for a *self-theological understanding*, that is, an understanding of one's own theological system. In this sense, it promotes theological self-definition. It is within this framework that contextual theology falls. Second, it allows for an *other-theological understanding*. In other words, it recognizes theological alterity, allowing others to define themselves and delineate their theological systems. Finally, it allows for an *intentional negotiation of theological meaning* with others. This being the case, it enables learning *about* others, learning *from* others, learning *with* others, and learning about oneself from others.

This means that sunomilean theology is co-constructual and interactional but does not mean a negation of one's theology. Auto-theologizing as a local/contextual theologizing is where it starts. It does, however, not end with local theology. Conscious of the limitation of contextual theology, the enrichment that the discovery of otherness provides, and the empowerment created by the synergy of difference, sunomilean theology seeks to be aware of others' theologies, learn from them, and, ultimately, theologize with others whenever necessary. In a nutshell, sunomilean theology pays attention (1) to the local context of the theologizing subject as well as that of others; (2) to the local and global contexts; (3) and to delineating a trans-theology from local theologies that transcends and is transversal to them.

It is precisely in its intrinsic potential to empower theological self-awareness/self-reflexivity, other-theological awareness, and intercontextual theological negotiation that sunomilean theology demarcates from forms of theology such as Black theology, Liberation Theology, Minjung Theology,

²⁸ Contextual theology differs from *intercontextual theology* in terms of degree of generality and universality.

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Feminist theology, Queer Theology, and the likes. While these theologies are contextual (they are localized and identity-based or ideology-driven theologies), sunomilean theology allows an approach to theology that enables both a contextual and trans-contextual engagement with Scriptures. Contextual forms of theology such as those mentioned above focus on a specific context, identity, or ideology; seek to be relevant to a locality, identity, or ideology; and, in general, employ methods akin to indigenization, contextualization, enculturation, etc. Sunomilean theology's focus is on dialogue across contextual theologies. Its goal is to facilitate and potentiate mutual learning across contexts and its methods of predilection are comparative and dialogic strategies of inquiry.

To articulate this distinctive differently, sunomilean theology starts within a contextual border (one's own theological context), reaches out to theological reflections beyond that border in view of understanding them (other theological contexts) and exchanging theological meaning with them (intercontextual semantic negotiation). It is therefore not just in-border theology. It is trans-border or inter-border theology. This essentially entails that to engage sunomilean theology, contextual theological borders need to be crossed. The following conceptualizing around the term *border* captures the contours of the development of sunomilean theology:

1. *Intra-borders theologizing*
Also describable as *in-the-border* theologizing, intra-border theologizing promotes the understanding of theological reflections within one's context. This is vital because social location/situatedness is a non-negotiable factor in theological knowledge production and ascription/attribution.
2. *Extra-border theologizing*
This is also portrayable as *beyond-the-border theologizing*. It promotes the understanding of others' theological reflections within their context. It is motivated by the knowledge that the world is multi-contexts and, although Christian theology is first contextual, it must also reflect this multiplistic reality, and, therefore, be multisite. It is further driven by the need for others and their theological reflections.
3. *Inter-borders theologizing*
I also depict this form of theologizing as *between-the-border theologizing*. It highlights the understanding of one's theological reflections together with others to see where they converge and diverge, are similar or dissimilar, and find common patterns in these multi-sited reflections that show harbingers for a trans-border theology. As noted earlier, this corresponds to theologizing with others. Theologizing with others enables an encounter between contextual/local

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expressions of the Christian faith. It builds on the premise that, however articulate and elaborate a local/contextual theology may be, it presents intrinsic limitations owing to its localness (local nature). It does not have the complete picture of reality. It is perspectival, angular, situated, and its presentation is monoglossic. Sunomilean theologizing is multiperspectival, multi-angular, trans-situational, and its presentation is heteroglossic.

Sunomilean theology therefore enables the unfolding of a theological polylogue, a theological conversation of many. It makes trans-theologizing or inter-theologizing possible. Although sunomilean theology allows for theological pluriversality, theological heteroglossia, and multi-sited and multi-polar theology, it also provides a space for local variations of Christian theology to engage in a conversation. In other words, it allows for theological dialogism. However, for sunomilean theology to fully find expression, learning quietness and, especially, developing the art of *productive intervallic listening* are vital. The expression describes a *betweenitivity* in which intercontextual communicators suspend their response until they have understood the other. That is, they listen to others not primarily to respond but to gain an understanding of what their interlocutors are saying. They listen respectfully; they listen to see the world from the others' perspective; they listen to create a synergy out of divergence; and they listen to live peacefully with others even if disagreements exist.

Definition and Conceptual Components of Sunomilean Theology

Definition

Sunomilean theology is a Scripture-based approach to engaging theology that takes into consideration diverse contextual expressions of the Christian faith in a bid to construct a theological discourse that mirrors both local/contextual and global Christian perspectives. It is constructed in a Scripture-anchored conversation/dialogue with Christians of other contexts/traditions and seeks to capture, reflect, and represent the voices of many.

Nature

Sunomilean theology is inherently conversational, enabling a talk *with others*. Those involved recognize that they have important views to defend and that others equally have important things to say. As such, it hinges on and alternates between key features of intercontextual communication such as silence, listening, talking, negotiating meaning (discussion), and collaboration, thereby highlighting the need for others.

Tone

Sunomilean theology is friendly and constructive. It is friendly in that those

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involved in talks show love and care for each other and ensure that their speech is not threatening. It is constructive in that, although intercontextual interactions may be confrontational, and thus a site of tension and contestation, they are carried out within a framework of Christian fellowship, with the ultimate finality being that of common edification and socioconstructivism.

Purpose

The purpose of sunomilean theology is to enable an understanding of theological self-identities, an understanding of the theological identities of Christians of other contexts, and the creation of a synergy of difference that results from a conversation with otherness for the sake of enhancing our practice of *missio Dei* in the world.

Outcome

Sunomilean theology allows a meaningful coexistence of contextual theological differences, keeping them in a dynamic tension so as to produce the transvaluation that comes from the encounter of contexts. Sunomilean theologizing also enables theological socioconstructivism — that is, the construction of theological knowledge that occurs within a context of energetic interaction with otherness. It engenders theology that occurs at the confluence of contexts and is mutually constructed.

Usefulness / Applicability

Sunomilean theology is practically and theoretically useful for the following reasons: (1) It provides intercontextual theology with essential new and vital concepts; (2) it provides a Scripture-emergent and Scripture-anchored methodology for engaging intercontextual theology; (3) it provides a scientific tool that can serve as a template/model for measuring and doing intercontextual theology; and (4) it proposes a practical approach to theology that syncs with the reality of a glocalized world as it keeps theological particularisms and universals in tension.

Rationale

Why a sunomilean theology? What is its justification? What is its rationale? Why is learning the *sunomilization of theology* — the process by which theology is *sunomilized* or sunomilean theology is constructed — important?

The Kingdom of God is a Global Reality

Although Christians naturally belong to a context, and to a great extent, are a social construction of that context, there is also a real sense in which every Christian belongs to an entity larger than its locality. From the moment someone truly pledges allegiance to Christ, that person becomes a citizen of the Kingdom of God (henceforth, KOG). Since the KOG transcends localness and embraces globality, one who becomes a Christian is integrated in a translocal

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and universal entity. There is therefore a dimension of universality in every Christian. It follows that participating in the KOG integrates both the notions of localness (context) and globality (trans-contexts). This means that Christian theologizing that does justice to the nature of the KOG should reflect this dual kingdom dimension: it should be local (this is where theologizing should start) and, at the same time, global. To be truly *basileic* (that is, mirroring the essence of the KOG),²⁹ Christian theological reflections should deliberately maintain the tension between the local and the global. Kingdom theologians should thus transcend local/contextual theologizing to engage what I describe as *glocal theologizing* — doing theology that keeps the local and global in synergy.

Trans-contextualism or Inter-contextualism Is Inevitable in Today's World

Today's world is both a mosaic/tapestry of contexts *and* a meeting place of contexts. Thanks to macroglobal phenomena such as air travel and multidimensional migrations, the encounter of people from several contexts has accelerated in unimaginable ways. Today, it is hard to meet people who are exclusively mono-contextual.³⁰ The advent of the internet has also reconfigured social geography, disembedding, delocalizing, and dematerializing social interactions. The internet has created a respatialized world (virtual/digital reality) that defies geographic boundaries and political frontiers. Life in a respatialized world is life that brings various contexts together, forcing intercontextual exchange and cohabitation. In this space, doing biblical theology requires thinking both locally and globally.

The Enriching Power of Synergistic Thinking

A proverb of the Igbo people of Nigeria says: “*Ibu anyi danda.*” The expression may be translated as “no task [or, load] is insurmountable for *danda* [a species of ant].” This proverb expresses the communal vision of many African cultures, an inclusive synergistic vision of reality that praises the strength of unity/communalism over individualism. It emphasizes that work is made lighter when many hands join in. Applied to theology, it means that theologizing (thinking the Scriptures) together is better than thinking alone. Without doubt, contextual theologizing is vital. However, much could be achieved for God's kingdom if contextual thinkers of theology came together in a collaborative conversation. Theological synergy in the body of Christ is of

²⁹ Editors' note: The adjective *baileic* is derived from the New Testament Greek word βασιλεία (*basileia*), meaning 'kingdom' or 'royal administration' or 'act of ruling' or 'royal reign' or 'territory which is ruled by a βασιλεύς (*basileús*). Usually translated simply as 'king', a *basileús* is “one who rules as possessor of the highest office in a political realm.” BDAG, s.v. βασιλεία and s.v. βασιλεύς.

³⁰ Editors' note: To be sure, there remain many rather homogenous demographics in the world, in which monoculturalism and monolingualism remain the norm. But here in Africa, at least, such populations are very isolated and are thus, indeed, “hard to meet.”

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greater impact than theological isolationism.

All Knowledge Produced by Humans belongs to the Commonwealth of Humanity

All humans share co-creationality and co-humanity. This means that they all are created beings that mutually share humanity, equally created as the image and according to the likeless of God (Gen 1:26–27). Co-creationality and co-humanity generate in humans an essential transversality of shared nature and existence. This means that an ontological universality unites humans whatever their contexts. Christians share much more than co-creationality and co-humanity. They also share co-recreationality. They are recreated in Christ to form a new humanity. Hence, they are linked by a transversality of shared humanity, shared creation, and shared re-creation. This means that beyond being contextual constructions, they share an essential universality that is both physical, spatial (they live in the same *kosmos*), and metaphysical (recreation in Christ is spiritual). It follows that the hard fragmentation of human production on individual or contextual grounds is antithetical to both the core reality of human existence and the universalistic essence of Christianity. Hence, although I take responsibility for my Africanness (this may be evident in my reading of Scriptures and thoughts patterns), I also view myself as a global citizen, that is, one who belongs to humanity and acknowledges both its universality and particularisms. As a result, I believe in the universal validity of knowledge humans produce as being a commonwealth of humanity. I therefore draw from it without racialized prejudice so long as it can help advance the cause of *missio Dei* on earth.

Preventing a Fixation with Particularistic Theologies

A fixation with one's theology may engender a tendency towards its standardization, normativization, or universalization. In the past, Westerner's fixation with their own theology fostered the notion that their theological reflections were *theologia perennis* (a single, correct theology that is immutable across time) or *theologia universalis* (a single, universal theology that is immutable across geographies and cultures). Consequently, they felt that their theology, being both *theologia perennis* and *theologia universalis*, was to assume global dominance. That justified why they exported it to all corners of the globe, imposing it on others as *the* theology, practicing proselytization rather than seeking conversion. This approach which has the potential for *contextual theologicide* (the genocide of contextual theology) came as a result of an undue obsession with one's own theology at the detriment others' theologies. Today, narrow contextual theological constructions, wherever they may originate, face the same temptation of nurturing in itself the unhealthy desire of seeking standardization.

Preventing an Undue Fragmentation of Christian Theologies

Staying at the level of contextual theology alone has the potential to

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fragment Christian theology into several competing contextual theologies. This fragmentation may result in reductionist, compartmentalized, or segmented theologies that reflect several contextual worldviews but collapse Christian theology into multiple isolated parts. The danger would be that of losing the global picture of Christian theology because the whole would have been disintegrated into theological particularisms or contextual theological specificities. Having a smorgasbord of contextual theologies is laudable as it highlights the contextual multifacetedness of those involved in making sense of God and God's revelation in Scripture — hence the need for intercontextual theology that at the same time promotes theological particularisms but also emphasizes the place of a holistic understanding (although provisional) of Christian theology. Thus, it is necessary to always maintain contextual and global theology in tension.

Conclusion

The Church needs intercontextual theologies. Sunomilean theology is a biblical model for engaging in intercontextual theologizing. Doing theology in a globalized world necessitates a globalized approach to theology. In a world that is built on a transversality of shared humanity, characterized by heightened inter/trans-contextuality, and shaped by the profound respatialization of its social geography that makes intercontextual encounter co-substantial to today's life, formulating Christian theological reflections that keep abreast of the times requires considering both local and global realities. Theology that reflects today's *zeitgeist* should be profoundly contextual and intercontextual— that is, sunomilean.

With the dramatic changes that have intensified intercontextual encounters around the globe and made them an essential feature of present-day societies, Christian theologizing that refuses to integrate these realities in its activities and to intentionally look beyond itself will soon lapse into the irrelevance of theological ghettoization. To prevent this and to theologize in a way that keeps local lives and global forces in constant equilibrium demands, first of all, that contemporary theologians develop skills for both contextual theology and the *sunomilization* of theology. This means that today's theological institutions should produce both contextual theologians and theologians who are *active interists* or *dynamic intervallists*. They should hone in their students both contextual theological competence and intercontextual theological literacy. The sunomilization of theology also requires the adoption of a meta-theological frame that explores various contextual expressions of theology and synergistically brings them together in a meaningful, constructive, and productive encounter. This will result in local theologies being enriched by other local expressions of theology.

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³¹ Editors' note: A revised edition was published in 2024 by Éditions Contact in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

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³² Editors' note: The *Insituut voor Intercontextuele Theologie*, located in Apeldoorn, The Netherlands, has since launched a new website, <https://iith.s2soon.nl/nl/>



Partners, Not Rivals

Gender Inequality and Its Implications for Women's Participation in Pastoral Leadership in Church of Christ in Nations

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Abstract

Gender equality is a biblical and universally recognized moral principle. Women, however, find it difficult to flourish in the religious space because many doors are closed to them as a result of the persistent widespread belief that they are inferior. Women, despite forming the larger percentage of congregational membership in churches, still occupy the smallest space in pastoral leadership. The Bible is often used as a tool for the restriction of women, ignoring both that God's grace liberates men and women bringing them to work together in partnership and that as God's image bearers, women have an innate need that requires them to perfect themselves through full participation in church. Sometimes the search for answers to the question of what women's place in the church is, raises tensions that pitches men and women into rival camps of opinions rather than ministry partners. Using an African feminist theological framework, this article examines the implications of gender inequality on women's participation in pastoral leadership in Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN). Findings show that cultural worldviews have modified the biblical hierarchy of relationship of equal image bearers of God and equal rulers of creation such that male leadership is assumed to be normative in every sphere of life. In COCIN, cultural practices and biblical interpretations have been uncritically applied to limit women from assuming ecclesiastical positions, including leadership. Education and re-education that accepts the interface of theology and culture, and 'two-winged' theology, empowering congregations' participation and embodying the mission of Christ are recommended as way forward.

¹ Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) is a Nigerian denomination founded in 1904..

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Résumé

L'égalité des sexes est un principe moral biblique et universellement reconnu. Cependant, les femmes ont du mal à s'épanouir dans le domaine religieux, car de nombreuses portes leur sont fermées en raison de la croyance persistante et largement répandue selon laquelle elles sont inférieures. Bien qu'elles représentent la majorité des membres des congrégations religieuses, les femmes occupent toujours une place mineure dans la direction pastorale. La Bible est souvent utilisée comme un outil pour restreindre les femmes, ignorant à la fois que la grâce de Dieu libère les hommes et les femmes en les amenant à travailler ensemble en partenariat, et qu'en tant que porteuses de l'image de Dieu, les femmes ont un besoin inné qui les oblige à se perfectionner en participant pleinement à la vie de l'Église. Parfois, la recherche de réponses à la question de la place des femmes dans l'Église suscite des tensions qui opposent les hommes et les femmes dans des camps rivaux plutôt que dans un partenariat ministériel. S'appuyant sur un cadre théologique féministe africain, cet article examine les implications de l'inégalité entre les sexes sur la participation des femmes à la direction pastorale au sein de l'Église du Christ dans les Nations (COCIN : *Church of Christ in Nations* en anglais). Les résultats montrent que les visions culturelles du monde ont modifié la hiérarchie biblique des relations entre les êtres humains, créés à l'image de Dieu et égaux en tant que maîtres de la création, de telle sorte que le leadership masculin est considéré comme la norme dans tous les domaines de la vie. Au sein de la COCIN, les pratiques culturelles et les interprétations bibliques ont été appliquées sans discernement afin d'empêcher les femmes d'accéder à des postes ecclésiastiques, y compris à des postes de direction. Il est recommandé, pour aller de l'avant, de mettre en place une éducation et une rééducation qui acceptent l'interface entre la théologie et la culture, ainsi qu'une théologie « à deux volets », qui renforce la participation des congrégations et incarne la mission du Christ.

Resumo

A igualdade de gênero é um princípio moral bíblico e universalmente reconhecido. No entanto, as mulheres têm dificuldade em prosperar no espaço religioso porque muitas portas lhes estão fechadas, devido à crença generalizada e persistente de que são inferiores. Apesar de constituírem a maior percentagem dos membros das congregações nas igrejas, as mulheres ainda ocupam o menor espaço na liderança pastoral. A Bíblia é frequentemente usada como uma ferramenta para restringir as mulheres, ignorando tanto que a graça de Deus liberta homens e mulheres, levando-os a trabalhar juntos em parceria, quanto que, como

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portadoras da imagem de Deus, as mulheres têm uma necessidade inata que as leva a aperfeiçoar-se por meio da participação plena na igreja. Às vezes, a busca por respostas para a questão de qual é o lugar das mulheres na igreja gera tensões que colocam homens e mulheres em campos opostos de opiniões, em vez de parceiros no ministério. Utilizando um quadro teológico feminista africano, este artigo examina as implicações da desigualdade de gênero na participação das mulheres na liderança pastoral na Igreja de Cristo nas Nações (COCIN: *Church of Christ in Nations* em inglês). As conclusões mostram que as visões culturais do mundo modificaram a hierarquia bíblica da relação entre portadores da imagem de Deus e governantes da criação, de tal forma que a liderança masculina é assumida como normativa em todas as esferas da vida. Na COCIN, as práticas culturais e as interpretações bíblicas têm sido aplicadas acriticamente para limitar as mulheres de assumir cargos eclesiais, incluindo a liderança. A educação e a reeducação que aceitam a interface entre teologia e cultura, e a teologia “de duas asas,” capacitando a participação das congregações e incorporando a missão de Cristo, são recomendadas como caminho a seguir.

Keywords

Christian equality, gender, gender inequality, inequality, partnership, pastoral leadership

Mots-clés

égalité chrétienne, genre, inégalité entre les sexes, inégalité, partenariat, direction pastorale

Palavras-chave

igualdade cristã, gênero, desigualdade de gênero, desigualdade, parceria, liderança pastoral

Introduction

Gender equality poses a critical concern influencing every sphere of life — including the religious. In the context of pastoral leadership, this concern has theological and socio-cultural implications that necessitate the re-examination of traditional understandings of leadership with the view to challenge long-held Scripture interpretations, historical church practices, and societal norms often used to limit participation in leadership roles on the basis of sex.

Discussions on gender often stir negative sentiments because gender discourses are assumed to be an affront on presumed male authority, and thus male identity. In a class on feminism, a student asserted that feminism is evil and a rebellion against God. He argued that gender inequality is divinely

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ordered because God has always put the woman in subjection to the man. This discussion pitched the class into different groups with some agreeing silently with him, and some with the feminists arguing that patriarchy is the problem because it has promoted male dominance, and women have been systematically oppressed and put in a disadvantaged position. This affirms the view of Noko in his Foreword to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)'s action plan for churches that "religious discourse is one of the most powerful and surreptitious forms through which cultural systems feed and maintain unequal gender relations."²

In Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Nigeria, there has been an increase in women's participation in ministry functions and leadership roles; however, pastoral leadership is still in the male domain. The notion of a subordinate role of women is widespread in traditional myths of creation and cultural practices, leading to the exclusion of women. The question of the equality of men and women in leadership has been an issue of heated debate, and in some cases scriptural arguments have been advanced to support and justify the restriction of women from full participation in pastoral ministry, particularly in the aspect of leadership. Biblical equality is grounded on the truth that God made humanity in his image (Gen 1:26–27, 9:6; Jas 3:9). This means that

no matter our race, sex, age, ethnicity, ability, intelligence, health, wealth, whatever: all people are made in the image of God, by God. We are equally made in his image, equally blessed by him, loved by him, and created for him to rule his world as his representatives (Genesis 1:28).³

COCIN and women leadership

Pastoral leadership — the oversight of a congregation, particularly by ordained ministers — is a limited space for women. Traditional principles play out in COCIN's organization of leadership. The role of men and women in COCIN is marked by gender division of labour and leadership, the kind that fosters a power dynamic that favours men over women. Women are viewed through cultural, rather than biblical-missional lenses. Kaunda and Pokol observe that in COCIN, "women theologians are employed to teach and train Pastors for ordination but they are not ordained nor given churches to pastor

² Ishmael Noko, Foreword in *"It Will Not Be So Among You" (M. 10:43): A Faith Reflection on Gender and Power*, 3.

³ Claire Smith, "The Challenge of Feminism (2): God's Better Solutions."

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because they are women.”⁴ As I have argued elsewhere, this inequality is the result of what COCIN ‘inherited’ from her founding mission, and the patriarchal cultural context in which the church exists. Furthermore, “the leadership structure of the COCIN, which is a reflection of its missionary legacy, has not provided women with equal space to prove and distinguish themselves in the church as co-workers and co-priests in the expansion of God’s kingdom, and the building up of the believing community.”⁵ This observation finds support in Kaunda and Pokol’s assertion that instead of dismantling African patriarchy, the Sudan United Mission (SUM) missionaries “exported Christian and Eurocentric patriarchy and sidelined the experience of African women based on their biblical interpretation, which prioritized and assumed male experiences as normative for African Christianity.”⁶ In their discourse of the *Suum-ngi* creation myth, they argue that European Christian missionaries’ “so-called divine order of humanity” entrenches “racial categorization and gender dichotomization” and reinforces human domination. The practice of exclusion of women from ordination and key leadership in COCIN mirrors and reinforces conventional reading of the creation myth. Therefore, the myth of creation must be interpreted in light of the current efforts to build a world grounded in justice, equality, inclusiveness and belonging for all.⁷ Elsewhere, using the *Suum-ngi* creation worldview of the Kadung people, they had argued that the ‘founding fathers’ of COCIN, whom they describe as a “patriarchal missionary party,” and their subsequent handing over of ecclesial leadership to indigenous men (a reinforcement of the *Suum-ngi* worldview), contributed to the exclusion of women from leadership responsibilities in COCIN.⁸

At one time or the other, women have assumed leadership roles in both socio-political and religious spheres. In the early church, women held leadership positions that contributed to the advancement of the gospel. Female leadership in the religious space is not alien to African women. Studies by some notable scholars demonstrate that a considerable number of African independent

⁴ Chammah Kaunda and Benjamin Pokol, “African Christianity, Myth of Creation, and Gender Justice: An African Feminist Re-inculturation Perspective,” 16; citing COCIN, *General Conditions of Service* (Jos, Nigeria: COCIN, 2008), 6–65.

⁵ Rahila Jakawa, “Pastoral Ministry to Single Women in the Church of Christ in Nigeria, Gigiring Regional Church Council, Jos,” 102.

⁶ Kaunda and Pokol, “African Christianity,” 15–16. citing Chammah J. Kaunda, “The Public Religious Speech Acts That Does Justice: Reclaiming the Narrative of Resistance in the Zambian Context of Heterosexism,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (2016): 196–215.

⁷ Kaunda and Pokol, “African Christianity,” 8–9.

⁸ Chammah Kaunda and Benjamin Pokol, “Re-Inculturating *Suum-Ngi* Creation Worldview within Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Nigeria: An African Feminist Missiological Perspective,” 7–8.

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churches were founded by women. Women assumed leadership positions, reflecting the prophetic role which they had occupied within their traditional religion.⁹ Nguvugher traces the presence of COCIN women in public leadership to results of the inter-mission conference held in Miango (Plateau State, Nigeria) in February 1941 to discuss women's issues. SUM was represented by Mrs Olsen, who later became the secretary handling women's work in SUM. Further developments were informed by men's own unity and fellowship, a need that was underscored by the trauma of the war. Seeing the gains of fellowship, husbands began to allow their wives to associate with other women and fellowship, even away from home. As a result of this, "women began to move along this pathway of leadership and responsibility."¹⁰

The formation of women's fellowship widened the scope of women's participation in the Church. As more opportunities opened for women to gather in fellowship, Miss Bassie Barnie was saddled with the responsibility of organizing that of COCIN women. Barnier helped women to prioritize evangelism in keeping with the vision, mission, and activities of the SUM.¹¹ Under her leadership, the women had a sense of freedom and equality. They were resolved in their desire to let their light shine in order to bring glory to God as commanded by the Lord. So, as God's work progressed among the women, gifts of leadership were spotted.¹² Miss Barnie was assisted by indigenous women and in 1972 when she left, one of them took over the mantle of leadership. Subsequently, more women leaders emerged and the fellowship keeps progressing to higher heights. Today, the fellowship accounts for 80% of members of COCIN.¹³

Right from its inception, evangelism and mission have undoubtedly become core elements of the COCIN women's fellowship. According to Kangdim, motivated by the Great Commission mandate (a biblical demand and expectation to see the purposes of God and his salvation made known to humanity), missions and evangelism have become the main pre-occupation and 'watershed' of the existence of the fellowship.¹⁴ With the election of Mrs. Naomi Mankilik in 1997, the fellowship witnessed a more robust and organized women

⁹ Loreen Maseno and Elia Shabani Mligo, *Women Within Religions: Patriarchy, Feminism, and the Role of Women in Selected World Religions*, 2–3, 6, 19.

¹⁰ Dauda Chentu Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion: The Life and Contributions of Mrs. Naomi John Mankilik to COCIN Women's Fellowship and COCIN Community Mission*, 49.

¹¹ Jordan Rengshwat, Pauline Lere, and Gode Nuhu, "Impact of COCIN Women's Fellowship (CWF) 1942–2019," 92–93.

¹² Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion*, 50–52.

¹³ Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion*, 57–59; Yosi Maton, *ZME and Church Growth*, 12.

¹⁴ Jotham Kangdim, "Biblical Perspective of COCIN Women Fellowship's Engagement in Missions and Evangelism," 83–84.

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fellowship which built on the efforts of past leaders. Spurred by the challenge received from the conference she attended in South Africa, themed "Making a Difference," Mankilik challenged women to seek the lost, declaring 1998 as "the year of Evangelism."¹⁵ This evangelistic and mission-mindedness informed the founding of the Warari and Sarari mission fields by the women's fellowship.¹⁶

African feminist theology and gender equality

The 1960s witnessed the rise of liberation theologies, with feminist theology consolidating itself, particularly in the West. In 1989, a group of African women gathered in Ghana to examine the impact of religion and culture on women. Using the analogy of the inability of a bird with one wing to fly to demonstrate the limitation of a theology that is predominately male to be effective, the women emphasized that women's voices are the other wing that will make African theology to fly.¹⁷ This initiative, which marked the founding of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, has as its main aim building the capacity of African women to contribute their knowledge, through critical thinking and analysis, to address issues of social justice using "a theoretical framework based on theology, religion and culture."¹⁸

Religion and culture have remained the main sources of women's disadvantaged positions in both church and society. Undergirded by hermeneutics and theology of liberation, African feminists' pursuit for gender equality is a struggle for gender justice in the context of religion and culture.¹⁹ It is a cause "framed by an ideology and concern for the liberation of women"²⁰ as well as the pursuit of human flourishing. They also draw from the ideals of gender justice, which calls for "the ending of and, if necessary, the provision of redress for inequalities between women and men that results in the subordination and oppression of women. It is fostering radical justice and equality for all human beings"²¹ because "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."²² African feminists are concerned with the search for gender equality in opportunities, not an abolishing of distinctives between men and women, because the equal value of men and women is grounded in their shared

¹⁵ Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion*, 94–95.

¹⁶ Nguvugher, *A Woman of Passion*, 110.

¹⁷ Teresia Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies, the Global Village, and the Imperative of Solidarity Across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," 80.

¹⁸ Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, "Vision, Values & Mission."

¹⁹ Isabel Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, "Introduction: Treading Softly but Firmly," 2.

²⁰ Phiri and Nadar, "Introduction: Treading Softly but Firmly," 5.

²¹ Liza Lamis, "Empowering the Church for Gender Justice," 32.

²² Teresia Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies," 85.

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human dignity, necessitating equal participation in society, equal rights and responsibilities, and the elimination of gender-based injustice.²³ Okure argues that “seen in its proper perspective, the women question today is a humanity issue. The issue concerns the nature, status and role of women in church and society in relation to men, ‘the other half’ of humanity.”²⁴

African feminism engages in critical assessment of the role of culture and religion in moulding the lives and destinies of women, and its theological engagement “shaped and influenced by the historical, religious, cultural, and theological milieu in which [women] live.”²⁵ Like feminists in other contexts, African feminist theologians see women's experiences as source for theological reflection. They believe strongly that theology is not only shaped by abstract doctrines and academic discourses, but also by lived experiences of people, especially women who are positioned at the centre of family, community, and religious life. Women's experiences include, but are not limited to, “sexual exploitation, oppressive hierarchical structures in the churches, oppressive customs and marriage structure.”²⁶ Therefore, cultural hermeneutics must be used to deconstruct oppressive cultural ideologies and to intensify advocacy for a just society that enables all to flourish regardless of gender, ethnocultural identity, social status, context, and vantage point. Kanyoro's feminist cultural hermeneutics calls Christian men and women into a pilgrimage of justice, which involves advocating for women's ascension into leadership positions that determine the policies address gender discrimination.²⁷

Feminist hermeneutics brings the story of marginalized to the centre of theological discourse, enabling the retrieving from culture what is empowering, and the deconstruction of what is oppressive. As a theology of hope, it calls all to a core-partnership that dismantle systemic structures of injustices, and a reconstruction of structures and systems to embody the values of ubuntu,²⁸ an African philosophy that emphasizes mutual respect, interdependence, and the dignity of every member of the community. Coming from a community-oriented context, African feminist theologians argue for cooperation and

²³ Chimwemwe Harawa-Katumbi, “The Bible, Gender Equality and Teaching Theology in Malawi,” 106; citing Pelle Billing, “Defining Gender Equality,” 24 April 24 2009, <http://www.pellebilling.com/2009/04/defining-gender-equality/>

²⁴ Teresa Okure, “Contemporary Perspectives on Women in the Bible,” 4.

²⁵ Teresia M. Hinga, “Between Colonialism and Inculturation: Feminist Theologies in Africa,” 26.

²⁶ Loreen Maseno, “African Women's Theology and the Re-imaging of Community in Africa,” 3.

²⁷ Dorcas Juma, “Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics and a Theology of Women Empowerment: Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro's Global Pilgrimages of Justice,” 128.

²⁸ Hinga, “African Feminist Theologies,” 84.

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mutuality, rather than hierarchy in relations between men and women.²⁹ Oduyoye maintains that “cultural hermeneutics enables women to view the Bible through African eyes and to distinguish and extract from it what is liberation.”³⁰ Maseno notes that African theology gives prominence to community, yet fails to examine those aspects which repudiate African women’s full humanity.³¹ In doing theology from an African feminist perspective, African women challenge the patriarchal culture so dominant in Africa, recognizing that “African culture is a double-edge sword that provides deep religious and cultural roots for community life, while at the same time it also binds women.”³² According to Kanyoro, African women theology employs the tools of feminism because feminist methodology critically interrogates cultural socialization, and challenges the presumption that roles of men and women are predetermined either by divine ordinance or cultural tradition.³³

African Christian theologians therefore argue for the re-imagining of community to include women’s concerns as “a distinct group with inherent varieties within this category”³⁴ and are resolved in their stance that in doing theology (in partnership with their male counterpart), women are seeking for the expression of their theological views and rightful places in church. Affirming this resolve, Kaunda and Pokol assert that African women theologians are urging their male counterparts to engage in theological dialogue aimed at retrieving life-affirming resources from African religio-cultural heritages that uphold the full humanity of women and the integrity of all creation.³⁵ Similarly, highlighting its transformative nature, Kosomo and Maseno state that African feminist theology promotes inclusive, meaningful, and empowering relationships that allow both men and women to flourish, while rejecting the limiting of women’s full humanity and acceptance as equals.³⁶

Implications of Gender Inequality for Pastoral Leadership in COCIN

Put in context, gender inequality in pastoral leadership has significant theological, ecclesial, and cultural implications for how COCIN understands

²⁹ See Teresa Okure, “Feminist Interpretations in Africa,” and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*.

³⁰ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 11.

³¹ Maseno, “African Women’s Theology,” 2.

³² Letty M. Russell, “Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye: Wise woman bearing gifts,” 51.

³³ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, “Engendered Communal Theology: African Women’s Contribution to Theology in the 21st Century,” 168.

³⁴ Maseno, “African Women’s Theology,” 1.

³⁵ Kaunda and Pokol, “African Christianity,” 7.

³⁶ Daniel Kasomo and Loreen Masebo, “A Critical Appraisal of African Feminist Theology,” 161.

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and exercises her mission, identity, and image in the wider society. As a church with a strong foundation in evangelical faith, COCIN must address the conflicts that often result from the intersection of theology and culture.

Theologically, the broader witness of Scripture supports the inclusion of women in pastoral leadership. The Bible upholds the equal value, gifting, and calling of both men and women. This is affirmed in Chemorion's assertion that cultural worldviews as reflected in the works of conservative scholars has modified the biblical pattern of relationships such that hierarchical male leadership is assumed to be normative in every culture. The portrayal of the male as ruler and head, big and strong, and the female as the tail, small and weak and to be ruled over, is a notion that assumes a gender-based hierarchy. This, however, does not find support in the creation account in Genesis and other texts of the Scripture because men and women are equally created in the image and likeness of God. Both share equally in the human condition of fallenness, are equally redeemable, and equally included in the new covenant. They are equally capable of receiving the Holy Spirit and of being empowered for life and ministry.³⁷

This implies that COCIN must revisit Bible texts that highlight the equal worth of men and women as well as supporting female leadership. First, understanding that by virtue of being created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–28), men and women reflect equal dignity, value, and capacity for leadership and responsibility including in the spiritual space. Second, the countercultural ministry of Jesus provides a model for pastoral leadership. Jesus saw women as capable of understanding, accepting and dispensing spiritual truth, which was a marked departure from the Jewish thought and practice of his day. Third, the power of the gospel and life in Christ has brought equality that does not respect ethnocultural identity, social status, or gender: “There is neither Jew nor Greeks, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 NIV). Fourth, several biblical examples reveal that God has often called and used women throughout redemptive history to lead, teach, and shepherd. Women demonstrated capability for spiritual and political leadership (e.g., Exod 15:20–21; Judg 4–5; 2 Kgs 22:14–20), theological competence (e.g., John 4; Acts 18:26), courage and trustworthiness (e.g., Esther; Romans 16:1–2), faith and trust (e.g., Ruth 1:16–17; Luke 1:38), and loyalty and commitment (e.g., John 20:1–3, 11–19). Fifth, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given without gender distinction. Biblical texts including 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12:6–8, and Ephesians 4:1–11 speak to the diversity of spiritual gifts and the unity of the body of Christ. These gifts are distributed by the Spirit as the Spirit wills — not

³⁷ Diphus Chemorion, “Created Equal: A Fresh Look at Gender Equity in Genesis 1–3,” 36–37.

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according to gender, status, or hierarchy. This has significant implications for the partnership of men and women in leadership and participation in the church. The body of Christ is healthiest when all gifts, regardless of the sex of the recipients, are recognized and released for the building of the church. As Kaunda and Pokol rightly point out, because human beings share a “common *origin*, common *essence*, and common *destination*,” maleness and femaleness should only be seen as portraying variation in creation, rather than hierarchy of functions.³⁸

Because Scripture affirms both the ontological equality of men and women and their essential equality in Christ, a re-evaluation of both ecclesiastical and cultural systems that restrict women's access to pastoral leadership is necessary. From the perspective of African feminist theology, the pursuit of gender equality in pastoral leadership is not merely a question of theological integrity, but one that is deeply rooted in the demand for justice within both ecclesial and cultural systems that have historically excluded women from decision-making and leadership roles in the church. Within COCIN, the persistence of patriarchal interpretations of Scripture, often reinforced by uncritical acceptance of cultural norms and traditions, has contributed to systemic barriers to women's participation in pastoral leadership despite constituting the majority of congregational membership. Undoubtedly, the restriction of women from pastoral leadership not only contradicts the inclusive nature of the gospel but also weakens the church's capacity to minister holistically to its diverse congregations. African feminist theology, therefore, calls for a re-reading of Scripture that affirms the equal dignity and divine calling of women and a contextual ecclesiology that recognizes the historical and spiritual contributions of women to the church. It challenges a revisioning of policies, liturgical practices, and leadership structures, particularly in churches such as COCIN where spiritual leadership is a male-dominated space. Ignoring this transformative approach undermines justice and righteousness and the opportunity to embody the Church's mission through shared leadership.

Furthermore, the rich heritage of African communal values provides a constructive resource from which COCIN can draw a framework for partnership in pastoral leadership. Historical witnesses show that in many pre-Christian African societies, women held significant leadership roles across spiritual, social, and communal spheres. Women served as priestesses, custodians of shrines, healers, and even political rulers.³⁹ These roles granted both authority and cultural legitimacy, allowing them to shape spiritual

³⁸ Kaunda and Pokol, “African Christianity,” 17; emphasis added.

³⁹ Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, “Women as Healer: The Nigerian Yoruba Example,” 161.

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practices and influence communal structures, reflecting a complementary understanding of gender. Thus egalitarianism cannot be said to be 'un-African'.

The Way Forward

The following proposals provide a starting point to moving forward.

1. **Theological re-examination and education:**

Education and re-education that underscore and awaken a commitment to the role of the Church as agent of justice advance gender equality. The contents of theology taught in sermons and theological education centres such as Extension Theological College (ETC), Extension Bible School (EBS), and in the public space must reflect a proactive effort to repair the imbalances that exist in COCIN, giving rise to a communal theology that see men and women in solidarity and partnership. Along with this, churches must recognize that doing theology devoid of the faith story of African women makes theology incomplete and contextually inept.⁴⁰ To foster inclusive pastoral leadership, theological institutions must integrate gender-inclusive curricula, thus equipping church leaders with the essential resources to address gender inequality from both biblical and contextual perspectives.

2. **A Two-winged theological discourse:**

For the mission of the church to be transformative, it must uphold a theology that is shaped by the experiences, insights, and voices of both men and women in their cultural contexts. African feminist theology does not reject African culture; rather, it seeks to engage both cultural traditions and biblical texts to uncover aspects that support justice, equality, and human dignity as well as reassert liberative elements inherent within African cultural and spiritual traditions. According to Oduyoye, a two-winged approach invites men and women into a dialogue that seeks to create a "new community of men and women" that reflect a partnership rather than taking or handing over.⁴¹ Phiri and Nadar assert that "African Indigenous Religion and Christianity are both replete with resources that bring healing to women and African

⁴⁰ Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Beads and Strands," 39.

⁴¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Search for a Two-winged Theology: Women's Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa – The Inaugural Address," 34.

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community from the multiple sources of oppression that otherwise deny health.”⁴² Nadar affirms the pivotal role of the Bible in the lives of women in Africa, and calls for a breaking from traditional modes of oppressive reading and engagement in critical ways of reading the biblical text until a liberating message is found.⁴³ As Oduyoye contends, any interpretation of the Bible that does harm to women and other vulnerable groups, including interpretations which defend or even dismiss abuse, must be rejected.⁴⁴ COCIN needs to critically engage in a two-winged inquiry that asserts the partnership of men and women working in solidarity to construct a cultural and theological praxis of gender equality using the lens of “Christ as the norm for the fullness of the human being.”⁴⁵ The church must be aware that the intersection of African cultural heritage and Christian theology provides a platform to explore core church concerns, such as gender equality in pastoral leadership.

3. Empowering congregations' participation:

COCIN must engage local congregations in discussions, teachings, Bible study, and activities that promote gender equality in leadership through the various groups such as men's fellowships, women's fellowships, and youth fellowship, Boys and Girls Brigades, and others. Church elders and fellowship groups leaders should be equipped to critically reflect on gendered power structures through teachings and dialogue grounded in the lived experiences of women in the church. Just as traditional myths, especially of creation, have influenced biblical interpretation in COCIN, oral traditions, proverbs, and indigenous knowledge systems can be reinterpreted in ways that affirm the dignity and leadership potential of women in church. Open dialogue and reflection should be encouraged within congregations to challenge entrenched stereotypes and encourage affirmation

⁴² Phiri and Nadar, “Introduction,” 9.

⁴³ Sarojini Nadar, “Texts of Terror: Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church and Society: The Case of Esther 2:1–8,” 78–79.

⁴⁴ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 12.

⁴⁵ Maseno, “African Women's Theology,” 6.

Editors' note: Maseno here miscites Mercy Oduyoye, *Who Will Roll the Stone Away? The Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, Risk Book Series 47 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 27.

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of women's pastoral calling. Such communal participation in leadership fosters transformation and nurtures theology *from below*, enabling communities to resist gender injustice in both institutional and daily expressions of faith.

4. Embodying the mission of Christ:

The Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) is not merely a call to proclaim the gospel, but a mandate to embody the holistic mission of Christ, living as a transformative presence in the world led by the Holy Spirit who calls and empowers believers, regardless of sex. As Bwire points out, in the Great Commission, Christ sends us to all nations with a transformative gospel. Gender equality is part of this transformation, marked by renewed relationships and godly and informed choices. These in turn lead to character growth and the flourishing of the body of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶ Establishing gender-inclusive policies that provide theological education and leadership training for women provides an enabling environment for the realization of this mission. Similarly, appointing women in higher decision-making spaces would make their voices heard and presence visible in the church.

Conclusion

Theological reflection and the realities of contemporary African ministry require prompt attention to gender equality in pastoral leadership. In light of the historical yet unbiblical constraints on women's roles in church leadership, COCIN needs a critical re-evaluation of cultural assumptions and scriptural interpretations. Gender equality in pastoral leadership is a theological and missional necessity, affirming the equal calling of all believers and enabling the Church to fully embody the gospel's transformative nature.

Embracing an African feminist theological approach offers a transformative lens through which the church can affirm the full humanity and leadership capacity of women. By fostering a gender-inclusive theological education that bridges theology and culture, alongside adopting a *two-winged* model of ministry in which men and women serve as equal partners, empowering congregations' participation and embodying the mission of Christ, COCIN can more faithfully live out the liberating message of the gospel, dismantling barriers and fostering true partnership in pastoral leadership. Moving forward requires

⁴⁶ John Peter Bwire, "Practicing Biblical Equity in African Society," 190.

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adopting an approach that is biblically grounded, culturally sensitive, and justice-focused to enable effective engagement with diverse communities and embody God's image. As Oduyoye rightly states, "partnership of women and men, ordained or not, is the true image of the Church of Christ."⁴⁷

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⁴⁷ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 86.

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⁴⁸ Editors’ note: A 2001 reprint edition is available from SWL Press in Accra-North, Ghana.

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Prevention and Care during the Covid-19 Pandemic:

Masculinities as a Double-Edged Sword¹ for Men and Women in Church Leadership in some Malawian Urban Churches

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Abstract

In Malawi, about 70% of confirmed COVID-19 cases were men, and about 83% of those who died of COVID-19 were men as of between January 2020 and August 2020. This article focuses on the masculinities of men in leadership positions, particularly how it affects health-seeking behaviour during COVID-19 in Malawi. Most church pastors are men and they have the ability to influence, positively and negatively, COVID-19 responses through concepts of masculinities. Religious ethnography and grounded theology generated data for this paper. The study was based on men in leadership positions in selected urban churches in Malawi between 2021 and 2022. The paper uses a gender analysis developed by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. We found that some concepts of masculinities of men in church leadership negatively influenced COVID-19 care and treatment to the detriment of pastors and their members. We also found that certain concepts of masculinities of church men in leadership positively influenced health-seeking behaviors of pastors and some members of the church. This

¹ The term was first used in the Circle by Madipoane Masenya, a South African Circle Theologian in her conference presentation, “The Bible as a ‘Sword’ and a ‘Tool for Healing.’”

article contributes to Circle theologies promoting ordination as a strategy to increase agency of women in the affairs of the Church and shows a link between agency and COVID-19 response in Malawi.

Résumé

Au Malawi, environ 70 % des cas confirmés de COVID-19 concernaient des hommes, et environ 83 % des décès liés à la COVID-19 entre janvier 2020 et août 2020 concernaient des hommes. Cet article se concentre sur la masculinité des hommes occupant des postes de direction, en particulier sur son influence sur les comportements en matière de santé pendant la pandémie de COVID-19 au Malawi. La plupart des pasteurs d'église sont des hommes et ils ont la capacité d'influencer, positivement ou négativement, les réponses à la COVID-19 à travers les concepts de masculinité. L'ethnographie religieuse et la théologie fondée ont généré des données pour cet article. L'étude a porté sur des hommes occupant des postes de direction dans certaines églises urbaines du Malawi entre 2021 et 2022. L'article utilise une analyse de genre développée par le Cercle des théologien·nes africain·es concerné·es. Nous avons constaté que certains concepts de masculinité des hommes occupant des postes de direction dans les églises ont eu une influence négative sur les soins et le traitement de la COVID-19, au détriment des pasteurs et de leurs membres. Nous avons également constaté que certains concepts de masculinité des hommes occupant des postes de direction dans l'église avaient une influence positive sur les comportements des pasteurs et de certains membres de l'église en matière de santé. Cet article contribue aux théologies du Cercle qui promeuvent l'ordination comme stratégie visant à accroître le pouvoir d'action des femmes dans les affaires de l'Église et montre un lien entre le pouvoir d'action et la réponse à la COVID-19 au Malawi.

Resumo

No Maláui, cerca de 70% dos casos confirmados de COVID-19 diziam respeito a homens, e cerca de 83% das mortes relacionadas com a COVID-19 entre janeiro de 2020 e agosto de 2020 diziam respeito a homens. Este artigo centra-se na masculinidade dos homens que ocupam cargos de liderança, em particular na sua influência nos comportamentos relacionados com a saúde durante a pandemia da COVID-19 no Maláui. A maioria dos pastores da igreja são homens e têm a capacidade de influenciar, positiva ou negativamente, as respostas à COVID-19 através dos conceitos de masculinidade. A etnografia religiosa e a teologia fundamentada geraram dados para este artigo. O estudo centrou-se em homens que ocupam cargos de liderança em algumas igrejas urbanas do Maláui entre 2021 e 2022. O artigo utiliza

uma análise de género desenvolvida pelo Círculo de Teólogas Africanas Envolvidas. Constatámos que alguns conceitos de masculinidade dos homens que ocupam cargos de liderança nas igrejas tiveram uma influência negativa nos cuidados e no tratamento da COVID-19, em detrimento dos pastores e dos seus membros. Constatámos também que certos conceitos de masculinidade dos homens que ocupam cargos de liderança na igreja tiveram uma influência positiva nos comportamentos dos pastores e de alguns membros da igreja em matéria de saúde. Este artigo contribui para as teologias do Círculo que promovem a ordenação como estratégia para aumentar o poder de ação das mulheres nos assuntos da igreja e mostra uma ligação entre o poder de ação e a resposta à COVID-19 no Maláui.

Keywords

church leadership, ecclesial leadership, masculinities, masculinity, COVID-19

Mots-clés

direction ecclésiale, leadership ecclésial, masculinités, masculinité, COVID-19

Palavras-chave

direção eclesiástica, liderança eclesiástica, masculinidades, masculinidade, COVID-19

Introduction

Much has been written on masculinities and COVID-19. Theological Scholarship on masculinities in the context of health and healing can be found in the works of early members of the Circle of Concerned African Theologians (hereafter, the Circle). Mercy Amba Oduyoye, mother of the Circle, began this conversation in 1989.² Since then, Anglophone Circle women in Western Africa, Eastern Africa, and Southern Africa Zones joined this conversation. Isabel Apawo Phiri from the Southern Africa Zone argues that ignoring masculinities would limit effectiveness of HIV and AIDS interventions.³ Lilian Siwila, from the same Zone, wrote on this theme based on her research on the

² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Search for a Two-Winged Theology: Women's Participation in the Development of Theology in Africa: The Inaugural Address."

³ Isabel Apawo Phiri, "A Theological Analysis of the Voices of Teenage Girls on Men's Role in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa."

role of Masculinities in Gender-Based Violence in Zambia.⁴ Her discussion mainly centers on hard/negative masculinities that fueled Gender-Based Violence in Zambia. The discussion on masculinities has been echoed by men doing African Theology. Tinyiko Maluleke, for example, related his discussion on masculinities to the integration of men in liberating women from oppression.⁵ Tinyiko Maluleke and others such as Ezra Chitando⁶ have argued for the need to have a joint effort between men and women in liberating women from oppression. In our discussions in this paper, it becomes clear that leaving out discourse on masculinities would limit any intervention in the prevention and care of COVID-19 related illnesses.⁷ The dominant conversation by Circle women has been on negative masculinities that promote oppression and on the fact that society promotes such masculinities to the detriment of women and their children. This discussion is often in the context of patriarchy as a vice against women's liberation in religion and in the public space. Specifically, cultural and patriarchal norms continually impact the chauvinistic personality of men in relation to their health, and despite high educational attainments, masculinity and cultural norms remain major influencers of men's health-seeking behavior.⁸ The trajectory that centers on negative masculinities alone is in sharp contrast to the argument by the founder of the Circle, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who wrote on the use of *soft masculinities* in protecting women from harmful cultural and religious practices.⁹ We argue that soft masculinities enhanced care and treatment during COVID-19.

This article is written at a time when Circle Theologians have centered more on liberation of women by women. Originally, the Circle had been strictly an association of women theologians. It is only recently that Circle theology has also been done by men. This article contributes to emerging theological literature on the role of men in liberating women and in this case in promoting health and healing of women and their children on one hand and also on the role of men in promoting health and healing for men using experiences of church men in leadership as a case in point. Since God created men and women in God's image, men in the image of God have 'soft/positive' masculinities to liberate humanity during the COVID-19 pandemic; some men in ecclesial

⁴ Lilian Cheelo Siwila, "Masculinity and Empire in Religion and Public Life: Social Construction of a 'Real Man' in Zambia."

⁵ Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "'The Smoke Screens' Called Black and African Liberation Theologies."

⁶ Ezra Chitando, "Religion and Masculinities in Africa."

⁷ In Malawi in 2020, men were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, both in terms of confirmed cases and fatalities. "COVID-19 Rapid Gender Assessment (Malawi)."

⁸ Faith Osasumwen Olanrewaju et al., "Masculinity and Men's Health-seeking Behaviour in Nigerian Academia."

⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Search for a Two-Winged Theology."

leadership have 'hard/negative' masculinities because they also require grace to live a holy life.

The Approach of the Conversation

*“Human beings produce sociocultural form
through an arch of memories, actions and intentions.
Narrative is a way in which that act may be expressed,
rehearsed, shared, and communicated.”¹⁰*

This article focusses on how concepts of masculinities of men in church leadership influence health-seeking behavior. Based on religious ethnography,¹¹ especially participant observation, in-depth interviews, and primary and secondary sources, this article is developed from the thick data¹² that was generated from 2021 and 2022 as part of the larger Nagel Institute research on Engaging African Realities on the theme of “Spiritualities, Worldviews, Health and Healing in the Context of COVID-19 and HIV and AIDS in Malawi.” Utilizing narratives of men in church leadership in relation to how masculinities illuminated by worldviews and Christian spiritualities influenced care and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic, we abstracted meaning from their behavior in relation to how they responded to COVID-19.

In our research, we used participant observation and juxtaposed this with intensive interviews with men and women leaders in selected churches in the four cities of Malawi: Mzuzu, Lilongwe, Zomba and Blantyre. We also used focus group discussions to fill gaps in the data that we collected earlier through other methods. The number of participants was determined by the saturation point of data. We also utilized limited quantitative methods to provide context, especially statistical data in order to better understand the issues highlighted in the article. Periodically, we held small group discussions to get local interpretations on the data. This process enabled us to generate local theological concepts beyond what was merely a “thick description.” This is an important aspect of grounded theology which helped us to move beyond being descriptive to being generative. The key discussion question was on how masculinities of men in leadership influenced care and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is through these discussions that we generated much of the concepts that guided the reflections of this paper. Secondary sources were utilized to connect the scholars' reflections on experiences of men in church leadership in Malawi in an “iterant manner.” Gender analyses developed by the

¹⁰ J.D.Y. Peel, “For Who has Despised the Day of Small Things? Missionary Narratives and Historical Anthropology,” 582–583.

¹¹ James S. Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion: The Basics*, 31.

¹² Joseph G. Ponterotto, “Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept ‘Thick Description’.”

Circle were used in conjunction with perspectives from social sciences.¹³ The Circle is an academic gender community that writes from a Feminist point of view and was organized by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in 1989. Though it widely centers on experiences of women, it also includes experiences of men from the vantage point of how such experiences influence women, children and others in the community. Works on concepts of masculinity by the Circle were mainly related to HIV and AIDS and Gender Based Violence. Lillian Cheelo Siwila is an example of Circle Theologians who have produced a study on masculinities.¹⁴ This paper interacts with her work and we have consulted widely other scholars that are not Circle theologians, because the issue at hand had broader aspects beyond scholarship of the Circle Theologians.

This work does not present an exhaustive treatment of concepts of masculinity that influence care and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic; it is limited to concepts that emerged from the participants on whose information this article was based. Our work is based on wider research that was vetted by the Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee of the Directorate of Research, ensuring that we met all the requirements to protect the dignity of the research participants. Further, names of participants are only revealed when explicit permission was granted to do so.

Charting Our Conversation on Masculinity: Men in Leadership and COVID-19 Responses

This paper utilizes some aspects of the typology of three masculinities identified by Lilian Cheelo Siwila to situate our reflections.¹⁵ We do not utilize the typology in the strict sense because we did not begin our research to test them as this would have stifled local knowledge on the issue. We, therefore, only use aspects from these typologies where we see connections between them and local concepts of masculinities. The three typologies of masculinity outlined by Lilian Cheelo Siwila are based on those by Rhoda Sempe who wrote on “Missionary Manhood.” These are: *Traditional Manliness*, *White Collar Masculinity*, and *Clerical Hero Masculinity*.¹⁶ In this article, we have interacted with these typologies. Our central question in this discussion is *how do spiritualities and worldviews influence concepts of masculinity of men in church*

¹³ The Circle was launched in 1989 in Accra, Ghana and for this paper I restricted use of scholarship to the period of 1989–2017 because it is the period when the Circle was very active and many of the concepts I interact with were by scholars that wrote during this period.

¹⁴ Siwila, “Masculinity and Empire.”

¹⁵ Siwila, “Masculinity and Empire,” 42–48, 48–49, and 49–51, respectively.

¹⁶ Rhonda Sempe, “Missionary Manhood: Professionalism, Belief and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century British Imperial Field.”

leadership in the care and treatment of COVID-19 in Malawi? We have centered on these three concepts —

1. *Ine ndine* (chiTumbuka?: ‘I am who I am’), which expresses a concept of authority;
2. *COVID-19 ndikachani?* (‘what animal is COVID-19?’), which expresses a concept of strength or toughness; and
3. *Ine ndine wamkulu* (‘I am powerful’), which expresses a concept of power or of superiority

— to reflect on how masculinities configure themselves based on spiritualities and worldviews of Malawians during COVID-19 responses.

In this paper, we argue that these concepts of masculinities displayed during the COVID-19 pandemic have a basis in the cultural worldviews and spiritualities of the Malawian people concerning the definition of “real men” in leadership positions. According to Lilian Siwila, there are Clerical-Hero masculinities that ascribe power and control to men in ordained ministry and that such power has a tendency to enhance dangerous masculinities that undermine women’s liberation in the context of Gender Based Violence in Church and Public Life.¹⁷ In this paper, we only use the aspect of ‘control’ as participants that yielded this paper did not refer to ‘power’ in the three concepts of masculinities.

Concepts of Masculinity as a Double-Edged Sword

Concepts of masculinity that influence care and treatment during COVID-19 are likened to a double-edged sword because they either positively or negatively influence the role of church men in leadership in care and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a survey of 6,000 American adults, Dan Cassino found that men who identified as “completely masculine” were nearly three times more likely to report having contracted COVID-19 than those who did not.¹⁸ Secondly, concepts of masculinity do not only harm women, children and the elderly but even the men who lead churches. Janani Umamaheswar and Catherine Tan conducted a longitudinal study with college students in America and established that more men than women in their sample were associated with downplaying risks associated with COVID-19.¹⁹

We have developed this paper by using the three concepts of masculinity from local people as listed above. First we will explore *COVID-19 ndikachani?*

¹⁷ Siwila, “Masculinity and Empire,” 49–51

¹⁸ Andreas Walther et al., “Examining the Role of Traditional Masculinity and Depression in Men’s Risk for Contracting COVID-19,” 2.

¹⁹ Janani Umamaheswar and Catherine Tan, “‘Dad, Wash Your Hands’: Gender, Care Work, and Attitudes toward Risk during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

(‘what animal is COVID-19?’) and then we will turn to *Ine ndine* (‘I am who I am’ inclusive of *Ine ndine wamkulu* (‘I am powerful’)).

COVID-19 ndikachani? What animal is COVID-19? (concept of strength or toughness)

The expression ‘What animal is COVID-19?’ signifies that ‘real men’ cannot be attacked by COVID-19. Such men perceive themselves as hunters and that they are able to kill any animal. This concept where ‘real men’ are perceived to be ‘hunters’ is related to the concept that ‘real men’ are warriors in the traditional Ngoni culture. This concept is a culturally conditioned perception of a “real man” not only in Malawi but in Africa and beyond. This is possibly why the majority of domestic security personnel in cities are men. For a long time, police forces and armies had no women as soldiers or security personnel in Africa and globally, probably because these professions were linked to being ‘warriors’, a preserve for the male gender. Even in the current dispensation, there is only a small percentage of women in the military and the police worldwide and they rarely if at all participate in front line combat. “Traditional manliness”²⁰ is also related to this concept of a warrior. This perception is also carried over into Christian lived experiences of some men including those not in leadership. In this perception, men relate COVID-19 to a tiny animal that is too weak not to be slaughtered by them. This concept also referred to the fact that real men were ‘tough’ and resilient to COVID-19. This was displayed in many ways. In the study that yielded this article, the act by men to appear tough also contributed to some men being resistant to seeking medical treatment on the basis that their physical strength would fight off the disease.

A man in Zomba was sick and showed clear signs of COVID-19 infection, however he did not go for medical treatment. His wife and family members encouraged him to go to the hospital but he did not accept. He then got really sick to the state that he was not able to decide on what to do. This was the time when the family took him to a nearby clinic for treatment. The medical person referred them to Zomba Central Hospital where results showed that he was positive to COVID-19 and was put in the isolation ward. He got well after some time.²¹

Ngoni cultures have strongholds in the Northern and Central regions of Malawi, but city churches are places of multiple cultures as a result of migration of people from these stronghold regions into the cities usually in search for employment. We observed that resistance to mask wearing among men was rooted in the men’s attempt to appear tough. Rejection to wearing masks is a political statement to show strength as an important identity of being a “real

²⁰ Siwila, “Masculinity and Empire,” 42–48.

²¹ Woman Church Leader, Zomba Urban Baptist Churches, April 2022.

man.”²² In one of the cities, two clergy died suddenly and one of the grassroots interpretations was that the two died because they had lost the battle of becoming leaders of the church.

I was with a certain *Umanyano* [‘Women’s Group’²³] lady yesterday, and she has her own theory of the sudden death of the two pastors. Reverends *Akuti akuphana chifukwa cha maudindo*/they say they are murdering each other because of leadership ranks. The Church will meet this year to elect leaders.²⁴

The concept of toughness for ‘real men’ is mainly influenced by culture, spirituality and biology. Men in leadership perceive themselves to gain extra strength through faith in God. This is spiritual strength and congregants expect men in leadership to exhibit more strength as a measure that they had more faith in the Lord who is all powerful. This concept strengthened the perception of church leaders that they were tougher than men who were not Christians.

chiChewa

Ine ndinadwala koopsya ndi banja langa

Ndinali ndi zizindikiro zonse za Kolona.

Ndinapemphera ndipo nditapita kuchipatala.

Sanandipeze ndi Kolona.

English

I was very sick with my whole family.

I had all signs of COVID-19.

I prayed and when I went to the hospital.

I was not found with COVID-19.

He related his healing experience to the Biblical story where Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego were saved from the fiery furnace because of their faith (Dan 3). He further encouraged the congregants that with faith in God they would be protected from COVID-19 infection and death.

Although the concept of strength gave confidence to some men against the pandemic, men also displayed some weakness as they avoided contracting COVID-19. This might also be related to arguments by other scholars that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some men (re)configured their masculinities as a coping mechanism to the change in the culturally constructed roles.²⁵ As opposed to ignoring treatment based on the masculinity of “toughness,” some men opted to seek medical help. This contrasts with the reaction by some men in leadership positions who relied solely on their “physical toughness,” and even

²² Lori Rozsa et al., “Mask Schism: ‘Submission Muzzle’ or Civic Duty?”

²³ The chiTumbuka word *umanyano* means ‘united’ or ‘unity’ and in this context refers to one of a number of Christian women’s groups. (ChiTumbuka is spoken in Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.)

²⁴ Presbyterian Women’s Leader, 7 June 2022.

²⁵ Molly Manyonganise, “‘When a Pandemic Wears the Face of a Woman’: Intersections of Religion and Gender during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Zimbabwe,” 236.

condemned those that got vaccinated. The following incidence is one of the many instances where some men opted to suspend their masculinity of “toughness” as evidence of being “real men.”

At a funeral in Zomba, pastors, all men, sat on chairs in the open space outside the house as some pastors’ wives sat inside the house together with the bereaved pastor’s wife. Pastors also made sure that they observed social distancing. At the burial site, pastors stood as pastors’ wives and others sat on the floor. Standing positions gave the pastors opportunities to safeguard social distancing and avoid contracting COVID-19.²⁶

This outcome is consistent with the findings in other studies, which suggested that masculinity in health and healing is dependent in that, upon realizing that their masculinity roles would be in jeopardy due to diseases, men would be eager to keep their bodies in good health, hence would observe health promotion behaviors.²⁷

We also found that some men used the concept of toughness to care for others. The traditional understanding that women are carers does not mean that there are no men that are engaged in caring roles. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some men were also involved in caring roles. These are soft masculinities of men. Molly Manyonganise also argues that men were involved in roles that were traditionally considered to be for women.²⁸ In Malawi, though there were less strict lockdown regulations, many men in leadership positions also had episodes of working from home. This also included pastors as some churches did not hold physical meetings. Pastors spent time with families and there is likelihood that they shared with their wives some caring roles including cooking for their families. Mwiine established that men shared in roles of women including cooking in the kitchen.²⁹ Caring roles subjected men to fears of contracting COVID-19.³⁰ Some men were bold enough to disclose their COVID-19 positive status to the congregation and friends. This encouraged congregants to seek care and treatment because after such testimonies, some people sought contacts for access to herbal treatments.

Some of you might have witnessed that I did not come to church for many Sundays and you had heard that I was sick. I tested positive to COVID-19 and was very ill to the point that I felt that I would not live

²⁶ Participant Observation, Zomba Urban, July, 2021.

²⁷ Deeni Rudita Idris, Nur Shazwana Hassan, and Norashikin Sofian, “Masculinity, Ill Health, Health Help-Seeking Behavior and Health Maintenance of Diabetic Male Patients: Preliminary Findings from Brunei Darussalam.”

²⁸ Molly Manyonganise, “‘When a Pandemic Wears the Face of a Woman,’” 237.

²⁹ Amon Ashaba Mwiine, “Men in the kitchens and the (re) configuration of masculinity in domestic spaces during COVID-19 Lockdown in Uganda.”

³⁰ Umamaheswar and Tan, “‘Dad, Wash Your Hands,’” 9.

again. I did not go to the hospital but through a friend that also got infected I was encouraged to use herbal treatment and now I am well. Those of you who might have family members that are sick and show signs of COVID-19, we can talk outside the church so that I can explain to you the therapy that helped me.³¹

The Concept of toughness has roots in the African worldview. The experiences of men in Church leadership have shown that the concept of toughness was dangerous during COVID-19 and require transformation. Our research has demonstrated that transformation is possible as some men suspended the concept of toughness to realize health and healing during COVID-19. This supports Circle theology of Cultural interpretation that advances positive cultural elements and discourages negative cultural elements that are harmful to women, men and children.³²

Ine Ndine / I am who I am

Ine ndine wamkulu / I am powerful

This concept of ‘I am who I am’ as a mark of ‘a real man’ in church leadership has origins in African worldview and spirituality. It is related to the concept of ‘the big man.’ First, this concept has roots in the traditional culture where ‘real men’ are perceived as superior. One popular chiChewa saying in Malawi that denotes this perception is that *mwamuna ndi wamkulu mbanja* — ‘the man is superior in the family.’ This concept of ‘I am who I am’ has also some similarity to the concept of “man of God” based on the Old Testament description of a Prophet and relates to a church leader who deserves great respect.³³ “Most of the times, there are a lot of praises for ‘the man of God’ before he moves forward . . . to deliver his sermon.”³⁴

City churches have separate worship services in English and in the vernacular language dominant in a particular city. English worship services provide avenues for charismatic influences in these churches as the Charismatic spirituality is associated with the elites that are members of the English services. Charismatic spirituality, therefore, enhanced the power of pastors in city churches to influence health-seeking behavior of their church members.

In Malawi, most of the leaders of congregations are men and these therefore influence most of the decisions of the church including how congregants should

³¹ Elder, Baptist Church in Zomba Urban, August, 2021.

³² Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspectives*, 64–66.

³³ Kenneth R. Ross and Klaus Fiedler, *A Malawi Church History 1860 – 2020*, p. 361.

³⁴ Rhodian Munyenembe, *Christianity and Socio-Cultural Issues: The Charismatic Movement and Contextualization in Malawi*, 62.

respond to COVID-19. The *Ine ndine* concept was therefore key in influencing health-seeking behaviors of congregants.

In all city churches where research that yielded this article was carried out, a pastor is the ruler of the congregation. This is true even in the Baptist church congregations where theoretically a pastor is not above the church.³⁵ According to Moses Mlenga, a pastor should be the first among equals.³⁶ The priest represents Christ to the Congregation.³⁷ This identity also contributed to exhortations by some clergy in city churches that undermined biomedical approaches such as wearing face masks and getting vaccinated. One pastor in a city church commended church members that they should fear vaccines more than COVID-19 if they had faith in God. This implied that COVID-19 was less effective to those that had a strong faith in God and that the reason he was not vaccinated was that he had extra strength through faith in God. Pastors are perceived to exemplify such toughness as leaders of congregations. Christian leadership identity, therefore, required power to configure “toughness” as a concept of masculinity for “real men” in church leadership. In a related story, a pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in Lilongwe City claimed that even though he had signs of COVID-19, he did not test positive to the disease when he went to the hospital for treatment.³⁸ If he had tested positive, he would have been perceived to have lost the concept of toughness as an important element for a “real man” in church leadership. His toughness was contextualized into his identity as a Christian and his ability to rely on protection from God through faith alone.

Even though there are a limited number of women as pastors, there are no women who are in the position of making decisions for the whole church. General Secretaries make decisions for congregations and congregations that informed this study had no woman clergy who was a General Secretary.³⁹

The *Ine Ndine* concept positioned men to influence COVID-19 responses. This is not a new area where Church men have been involved in providing solutions to social economic ills of the society in Malawi and globally. Wale Adebaniwa argues that Yoruba clergymen have an influence in the political affairs of Nigeria as they belong to the super-elite and can relate with those in

³⁵ Hany Longwe notes that “in some Protestant churches the congregation” — and not a pastor — “is the final authority.” Longwe, *Setting the Record Straight. Essays on Ecclesiology, Missiology and Evangelism*, 163.

³⁶ Moses Mlenga, “Cold War between Reverends and Ruling Elders in CCAP, Synod of Livingstonia: From Ruling to Assistant Elders,” 225

³⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [Latin: ‘The Dignity of Women’].

³⁸ Presbyterian pastor, Lilongwe, urban church, September 2021.

³⁹ Mercy Chilapula, “Towards Inclusion: Experiences of Women Clergy in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Blantyre Synod,” 4

political positions with ease.⁴⁰ In Malawi, some clergymen also were engaged in political reforms.⁴¹

In Malawi, prior to the 2019 elections, some churches displayed political inclinations. They endorsed presidential candidates according to their faith, regional and political affiliation. This was done during political rallies, in homilies at worship services, church announcements, pastoral letters etc.⁴²

However, this article is restricted to majority of the pastors who have no national influence on COVID-19 responses. In this position of authority, pastors have a role to influence members to embrace biomedical approaches through testimonies and sermons during Sunday gatherings.

The *Ine ndine* / 'I am who I am' concept of masculinity influenced pastors in city churches to act as spokespersons on how congregants responded to COVID-19 biomedical approaches. However, spiritualities of leaders, even within the same church, were sometimes the cause for ideological conflicts that undermined COVID-19 responses:

We did not practice much of the preventive measures against COVID-19, because our two elders one after the other announced in church that COVID-19 is just a plot and that they were not getting Vaccines. However, both contracted COVID-19 after they made the confession. Our concern is that some church members still believe in what they said and yet they have not gone back to the congregation to tell them what happened to them. We also know that both have received Vaccines.⁴³

The 'I am who I am' concept of masculinity also discourages some men from revealing their COVID-19 status. One of them is that getting sick with the virus signifies that one is not strong enough to fight. This is a display of one of the negative masculinities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A leader of my church contracted COVID-19. He was in an isolation ward for treatment but when he was discharged, he did not come to church. I visited him at his home several times and he always assured me that he would come to church the following Sunday which he never did. One time he opened up and told me that he could not attend services because he was ashamed that he contracted the disease and was not sure of how the congregation would receive him.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Wale Adebaniwi, *Yorùbá Elites and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria: Obafemi Awólowo and Corporate Agency*, 118–121.

⁴¹ James Tengatenga, *Church, State and Society in Malawi: The Anglican Case*, chapter 5; see especially his discussion starting on p. 153.

⁴² Timothy Kabulunga Nyasulu, "The Church in the New Era of Democracy: A Call for Non-partisan Prophetic and Pastoral Functions," 258.

⁴³ Youth Leader, Baptist Church in Mzuzu City, November 2021.

⁴⁴ Lilongwe Baptist Pastor, October 2021.

In the view of the *Ine ndine* concept, those men in leadership positions that contracted COVID-19 were seen as not 'real men' in church leadership.

Congregants often listen to men in leadership positions. During the Vaccination Campaign, there were two key pastors that influenced Baptists to get vaccinated. These were Rev. Vincent Chirwa of Blantyre Baptist and Rev. Fletcher Kaiya of Jerusalem Baptist in Blantyre. These are only a few of the Baptist pastors that influenced their members and at the national level through public vaccination and also through public awareness meetings. At congregational level, elders and pastors encouraged members mainly through declaring that they got vaccinated and encouraging others to get the same.

On the other hand, some church men in leadership positions referred to the teachings of their churches as basis for care and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the teachings were that Christians ought not be afraid of COVID-19 but live in faith to defeat it. Leaders ensured that congregants followed their decisions by looking down upon those that did not attend services.

In one city, church pastors made those that resumed church service attendance 'to stand up' to be welcomed by the church. Some welcoming remarks were derogatory. For example, at one time the pastor commented that those who did not attend church services were living 'double standards'.⁴⁵

Some leaders in the church discouraged members from getting vaccinations. This was done especially through teachings that explained away the efficacy of vaccines and even the existence of COVID-19. Such church leaders were influenced by spiritualities of their congregations but since some Malawian people do not only follow teachings of their congregations, such teachings influenced Christians across many denominations.

The '*Ine Ndine* Concept' as a concept of Masculinity is related to poor health-seeking behavior.

A pastor died in a certain city and prior to his death he had told the wife not to take him to the hospital. He was a Christian and also a traditional healer. He used traditional herbs all his life and did not trust hospital treatment. He got very ill and when pastors' wives visited him, they only met the wife and they were told that he was getting better and sleeping. But after a few days he died while receiving treatment at the house.⁴⁶

This story is one of the many stories where some pastors used the concept of *Ine Ndine*, to deny treatment to family members and even church members.

⁴⁵ Conversation, 19 May 2022.

⁴⁶ Conversation, 23 January 2022.

Conclusion

We have shown that there are both soft/positive and hard/negative concepts of masculinities of men in leadership that positively and negatively influence health-seeking behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Masculinities are not sex-specific and binary as women can also possess them. We have shown that pastoral positions influence health-seeking behavior in church and public life. Certain concepts of masculinity do not empower men in church leadership to positively influence COVID-19 care and treatment. The Concept of *COVID-19 ndikachani?* / What animal is COVID-19? (concept of strength or toughness) is problematic as it has the potential to undermine COVID-19 responses for women, children and men themselves. The concepts of *Ine ndine* / I am who I am (concept of authority) and *ine ndine wamkulu* / I am a 'big man' (concept of superiority) have potential to empower women to participate meaningfully in COVID-19 responses. Women in church leadership have an opportunity to share in the soft masculinities that influence positively health-seeking behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. But this may not be possible if women are not ordained as pastors. This is because, they may not share some aspects of the positive concepts outlined above. Circle theology has argued that ordination of women to the ministry of the word and sacrament accords them opportunities to be included in decision making bodies. This would particularly enhance positively COVID-19 care and treatment responses. If (more) women are ordained, they will have opportunities to influence local church responses to COVID-19 within their jurisdiction. Similarly, women can influence care and treatment at national level if they are appointed to positions that allow them to direct the affairs of the church. It is at that level of engagement that women can influence health-seeking behavior of congregants at national level.

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⁴⁸ A reprint of this article is available at *The Nation*, In Focus, <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30389997>



A Systematic Theology for All African Christians

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Kunhiyop, Samuel Waje. *African Christian Theology*. Bukuru, Nigeria: HippoBooks, 2012. Pp. vii + 249. £15.99.

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Summary

African Christian Theology, authored by Dr Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, a professor of Theology and Ethics at Jos ECWA Theological Seminary (JETS), is a greatly needed resource for the African church today. Written as a simplified and condensed systematic theology which outlines major theological themes, Kunhiyop composes a systematic theology that differs from those of a Western perspective dominating the theological landscape. Specifically written through the lens of an African worldview, Kunhiyop desires an African Christian theology not just for the Bible scholar or the theological student, but one that addresses concrete realities, and not abstract concepts, so that ordinary African lay Christians can understand and apply this accessible theology to their lives. Unapologetically believing that biblical Christianity is superior to all religions, Kunhiyop takes the African context seriously with a goal to communicate a theology built upon a high view of soundly interpreted Scriptures for application into everyday African lives.

Having to carefully determine which aspects of theology to give attention to and how much depth to apply, Kunhiyop covers the relevant theological categories in his clearly presented systematic theology that progresses logically from creation to final judgment. In chapter 1, he begins by laying a foundation of what theology is, how philosophy can contribute to theology, and how ethics is the end goal of theology. In chapter 2, knowing that African Traditional Religions (ATRs) believe that God reveals himself in dreams and visions, the author looks at biblical revelation, both general and specific, to understand how

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God has revealed himself to us and how he continues to guide believers today. In chapter 3, the author lays down a theology of God. An ATR concept of God, though similar to Christianity, lacks an epistemological understanding of the triune God who is powerful, yet incarnate and intimately present, mediating between God and man. This chapter also examines the African view of the spirits, both good and bad, to see how they align to the biblical revelation of the Spirit, angels, and demons.

In chapter 4, Kunhiyop describes creation and the fall. Though concepts of creation are similar, the author points out how the African concept of sin differs, often seen as breaking cultural communal codes or upsetting the ancestors. In contrast, the biblical perspective of sin demonstrates a breaking of our relationship with God and others, completely corrupting the human race. In chapter 5, a christology is presented that emphasizes both Christ's divinity and humanity, his prophetic, priestly, and kingly roles, as well as his work of atonement since "the concept of god dying on behalf of humanity is very rare" (5). Chapter 6 speaks to the Holy Spirit's salvific role and sanctifying work as well as tackles what anointing means in traditional belief and practice compared to biblical teaching. Chapter 7 deals with living out the Christian life, addressing common teaching in the African church, such as blessings and curses, praying in the name of Jesus or pleading the blood of Christ, as well as ancestral worship.

The book closes out with chapters 8 and 9 both addressing the Christian community. Chapter 8 speaks of the Church as a unified community, a concept familiar to Africans, reflecting God's glory through ordinances such as baptism and communion, as well as the missional role of the Church. Chapter 9 addresses beliefs and practices specifically relevant to the African church, such as spiritual gifts, church discipline, pastoral ordination, and women in ministry. Finally, Chapter 10 ends the book with death, judgement, and eternity. African concepts of death and ancestral afterlife are presented alongside a biblical perspective of a sovereign God in control of death and the grave, where believers face eternal life and non-believers face eternal damnation.

Evaluation: Strengths

As the author advances from creation to final judgment, he demonstrates his goal of communicating a systematic theology sensitive to the African context. In this pursuit, Kunhiyop asserts that "theology must be focused on the personal God revealed in Scripture and affirmed by historic biblical Christianity" (16). Believing theology constructed upon general revelation of God and the supernatural in ATR is flawed, the author points out the problem of contemporary African theologies that build upon the African worldview as starting points (with its human culture, experience, and beliefs) rather than

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upon God's special revelation as God has revealed Godself. With this belief as a basis, Kunhiyop pauses chapter by chapter to uncover the presuppositions of ATR worldview and beliefs his readers likely have lying beneath their Christian-professed identity, which greatly colors how an African perceives certain biblical concepts like anointing, sacrifice, blood, curses, ancestors, and death. The most relevant beliefs of an African worldview that differ to a biblical worldview are not ignored or demonized but are respectfully presented in the pertinent chapters and set alongside a systematic Scriptural review which serves as a sound biblical contrast concerning each of these strongly held culturally religious beliefs. Kunhiyop also does not ignore the fact that Catholicism has high rates of influence in quite a few African countries, so his systematic theology includes both Protestant and Catholic beliefs, as well as uniquely approaching difficult African contextual issues, like remuneration for pastors, and emphasizing familiar contextual concepts, like the concept of community.

The author continues his goal of communicating a contextual African theology through the sound interpretation of Scripture. Since a sound hermeneutic based on literal-grammatical interpretation is foundational to Kunhiyop's formed theology, particularly when contrasting the ATR worldview and beliefs with biblical beliefs, defining interpretation is important. African pastors commonly quote that "the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth" indicating that they adhere to a Spirit interpretation that emphasizes personal communication with God's Spirit as a basis for interpretation, thereby dismissing the role of serious study of Scriptures and the use of Spirit-inspired reason aiding understanding. Kunhiyop counters this misinterpreted understanding of Scripture by pointing to multiple examples of God's people commanded and praised for carefully examining and studying Scripture, through which God's Spirit has already communicated and revealed his truth. Kunhiyop also importantly distinguishes God's revelation from Spirit illumination. God's special revelation of himself through the inspired Scriptures is completed, yet his Spirit continues to give illumination — continued guidance and direction. However, any illumination claims of 'receiving a word from the Lord' or a 'special revelation' must be "scrutinized and subjected to the authority of the Scriptures" (36) which Kunhiyop emphasizes consistently throughout the book. God's special revelation of himself through carefully interpreted Scriptures is the ultimate authority by which all other thinking and "illuminations" must be subjected to.

Kunhiyop finally takes seriously his goal for theology to be applied into the lives of everyday Africans. In the introduction, the author instructs readers to be aware of their own cultural context which influences personal understanding, encourages readers to have a Bible and read all the relevant passages presented in each topic, guides readers to additional supplemental reading for each chapter

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if they desire deeper exploration, and most importantly has carefully crafted thoughtful application questions which helps readers to critically examine personal beliefs and process the presented theology, prayerfully asking God to transform their thinking and their lives.

Evaluation: Weaknesses

In a field dominated by Western-authored systematic theologies written from a Western perspective, Kunhiyop's goal is to write a systematic theology sensitive to the African context and its unique realities. However, there are many points in his book that perhaps still incorporate too much of a Western perspective on theology. Kunhiyop uncovers the various errors throughout church history regarding the divine and human natures of Christ, such as Nestorianism, Ebionism, Docetism, and Arianism, mentioning people still fall into these heresies today. Though one can appreciate rooting an African Christian theology within the greater scope of church history, mentioning these ancient historical heresies gives this systematic theology a Western basis that may seem irrelevant to today's African believers. An additional or substitutional inclusion of specific modern African heresies on the nature of Christ's humanity and divinity would be more relevant and contextual, scratching where Africans today are itching. Also, Westerners are often overly occupied with the future such that many Western systematic theology books have to spend an inordinate amount of time clarifying the varied views of eschatology. Most Africans, on the other hand, do not put much focus or importance on future time. Given these differences of cultures, one may need to consider approaching eschatology in a different way; yet Kunhiyop spends a disproportionate amount of time explaining in detail the multiple Western eschatological views on the rapture and the millennial kingdom that made this section feel like he was addressing a Western audience, reinforcing their categories, rather than approaching it afresh with African epistemological realities in mind.

Kunhiyop addresses church discipline as necessary to restore a brother in error and acknowledges many factors contributing to the decline of such discipline. One factor he mentioned is individualism. Though individualistic shifts are occurring more in urban settings combined with global influences, individualism is certainly a major Western problem inhibiting church discipline, rather than a major African problem. Rather a major unidentified factor hindering church discipline is that Africans are culturally communal people that highly value relationships. With a greater priority placed on preserving a relationship with a brother than to disturb the relationship or institution by addressing conflict, African believers often remain silent and church discipline goes unaddressed.

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Kunhiyop helpfully distinguishes between ‘revelation’ and ‘illumination’, making what I believe to be an important point for the African context. However, when summarizing chapter 2, the author terms everything as ‘revelation’ and does not carry out his previously argued distinction of terms when concluding the chapter, unraveling the distinction he sought to carefully create. Similarly, Kunhiyop went through a lengthy description to make a distinction between the ‘anointing’ of the Spirit which all believers receive, marking believers as God’s own, and the ‘filling’ of the Spirit which believers are commanded to continually seek in their Christian walks. However, when summarizing chapter 6, the author uses ‘anointing’ and ‘filling’ interchangeably bringing confusion to the very distinction he spent so much time creating. In both instances, maintaining the distinction throughout the entirety of the chapters would be beneficial to the readers.

Since deriving a theology based on properly interpreted Scripture is foundational for Kunhiyop, a rigorous task considering the vast number of Scripture passages referred to in this book, there are a few places where the soundness of scriptural interpretation is questionable. One example is when trying to argue that God revealed his divine self to all humanity before Christ’s incarnation by quoting Hebrews 1:1 — God “spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (NIV). Kunhiyop claims that though this verse was specifically speaking to the ancestors of the Jews, these words can be extrapolated “to apply to all our human ancestors who experienced divine revelation before the incarnation of the Son of God” (31), arguing that other Old Testament Scriptures also show how God revealed himself to non-Israelites. However, the author of Hebrews is not talking about God’s general revelation he gave to all humanity’s ancestors; rather, he is specifically referring to the special revelation God gave in the past to the Israelite people through many prophets which he contrasts with the special revelation he has currently given through his one and only Son (Heb 1:2). God’s general revelation to all humanity was not intended by the author of Hebrews and cannot faithfully be extrapolated from this verse.

A difficulty in writing a book like this is to determine which theological elements to focus on and how deeply to explore each topic or theme. Some topics Kunhiyop is rightly brief about, like biblical inerrancy, or is silent about, like the witness of multiple ancient manuscripts attesting to the text’s inerrant nature, since Africans do not have a hard time accepting the Bible as the inerrant word of God. However, Africans do struggle to understand what sin is. Though the origin and consequences of sin are briefly explained in chapter 4 when describing the fall, this section lacked a clear definition of what sin actually is. Having lived in Africa for nearly 20 years, I have often noticed that sin is only legitimized or tangible when being found out or when experiencing the shame

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of others knowing what one has done. But if sin is not uncovered, many do not see wrong or harm in one's own actions. Perhaps this is because Africans see sin in concrete terms rather than as abstract concepts, as Kunhiyop acknowledges. Millard Erickson offers a clear definition that "sin is any lack of conformity, active or passive, to the moral law of God. This may be a matter of act, of thought, or of inner disposition or state."¹ Without such a clear definition and understanding of the very nature and concept of sin, Africans may struggle to see or acknowledge sin that remains secretly covered. Other missing elements are certain Catholic theologies relevant to the African context. Though many applicable Catholic beliefs are presented, like purgatory and transubstantiation, the theology of Mary and the reverence of the Catholic saints are not mentioned. With similarities to the African concept of ancestors and their intermediary role, addressing this belief is relevant for Catholic believers.

Conclusion

All in all, *African Christian Theology* is highly recommended not only for students of the Bible, but for the audience it was intended for — the average African believer who desires to better understand and live out their Christian faith. This wholistic theological book, specifically tackling theological issues relevant to the African context, helps the African believer to identify what cultural and traditional religious patterns of this world they may still be conformed to, to differentiate them from the presentation of soundly interpreted scriptural-based theology, and to live out a transformed life that books such as these usher in through an effective renewal of the mind (Rom 12:2).

¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Baker Academic, 2013), 538–529.



African and European Collaboration:

Reading African and Latin European Crusader Sources Together

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Simmons, Adam. *Nubia, Ethiopia, and the Crusading World, 1095–1402*. Advances in Crusades Research. New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. xii+240. US\$43.99.

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The history of relations between Latin Christendom and Ethiopia during the Crusades is complex and confusing. One reason for this is that “Ethiopia did not identify as ‘Ethiopia’ until the arrival of the Solomonids. Neither was Ethiopia the kingdom commonly referred to as *Ethiopia* in Latin Christian texts” (x). Due to these points of confusion, the research on the Crusades has focused on the Latin Christians’ relations with Muslim and/or Jewish communities to the exclusion of Northeast Africans. Adam Simmons aims to fill this scholarly gap by highlighting the role that Nubia played in the Crusades, as well as the context leading up to the Ethiopian embassy sent to Venice in 1402. His thesis is that “much more can be said of the entwined histories of Nubia, Ethiopia, and the Latin Christians than is currently the dominant scholarly narrative” (1). Developing this thesis is difficult given the scarcity and fragmentary nature of the primary sources about Ethiopia and Nubia before the emergence of the Solomonic dynasty in the thirteenth century. The Latin sources entail an unfortunate confusion over the name ‘Ethiopia,’ i.e., to which kingdom/region/people group it referred.

Simmons works through the available material to argue that “Nubians, and then later Ethiopians, were explicitly sought as allies by the Latin Christians but only engaged in their own terms with contrasting results” (9). He develops this argument over six chapters. First, he contextualizes the name ‘Ethiopia’ in all its complex uses in the twelfth–fourteenth centuries. He then presents the three groups (Latin Christians, Nubians, and Ethiopians) as they existed and interacted in the early twelfth century. He dedicates a chapter to the Prester

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John myth, noting his location in Nubia and Ethiopia. The final two chapters focus on the Latin Christian requests for aid and the Nubian and Ethiopian responses. Thus, Simmons seeks to encourage more analysis of the source material not in isolation, but “to offer a reframing of the current corpus to provide a platform for future work” (10). This monograph has opened a new venue for research on this complex period of history, particularly showcasing the extent to which Africans were involved in the Crusade initiatives.

Simmons shows how the toponym ‘Ethiopia’ became associated with the north-eastern African country in the thirteenth century, as well as noting its diverse uses. He notes that “the Ethiopian adoption of the toponym initially confused matters for the Latin Christians” (15), since many Latin Christians associated ‘Ethiopia’ with Nubia. The first recorded use of the name ‘Ethiopia’ is from before 1200 BC in south-western Greece (15), and its etymology “remains obscure” (16). The reception of the Hebrew Old Testament word Kush (כּוּשׁ) produced a conglomeration of ‘Ethiopians’ (16–17), though the Nubians recognized the term ‘Kushite’ when used by Latin Christians (21). Also, when the Crusaders first encountered ‘Ethiopians’ in distinction from Nubians, they knew them as Abyssinians (22–23). After the Solomonic Dynasty took over, the use of Abyssinia seems to have dropped away, and ‘Ethiopia’ became the norm in Latin records (31–3). Thus, the name ‘Ethiopia’ requires nuanced interpretation in the respective sources. Despite this complexity, there clearly was familiarity between Nubians, Ethiopians, and the Latin Christians during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.

Simmons next contextualizes the Latin Christian shift in perspective of Nubia and Ethiopia from the years before the first Crusade to after encountering the peoples. One of the reasons for their misunderstanding was a “physical and intellectual rupture in the seventh century” (47). Thus, for the first Crusaders, “neither Nubia nor Ethiopia were of concern,” yet this radically changed after “the establishment of the Crusader States” in the twelfth century (51). This rupture manifests in the Crusaders’ negligible desire to engage with Christians in the African Northeast until the 1160s, and that the ‘Ethiopians’ whom Latin Christians expected to encounter were enemies of Christendom, based on histories that perpetuated the pseudo-narrative of the ‘Ethiopian’ enemy (58). When they finally met and engaged with the Northeastern Africans, the Latin Christians’ perspective quickly changed.

The third chapter aims to assess the way various individuals and texts contributed to the understanding and relationships between these groups. Simmons notes the many Jewish and Muslim sources that would have influenced and informed the Latin Christians. Thus, early Latin Christian understanding of Northeast Africans was mostly indirect, until the Crusaders

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turned their focus toward Egypt and sought alliances with the African Christians. Unfortunately, the available sources are fragmentary. Simmons argues that “whilst the scale of Nubian or Ethiopian interaction with Latin Christians in Egypt cannot be detailed with any great specificity until the fourteenth century, it should not be overlooked” (85). Simmons shows evidence of Nubian and Ethiopian presence throughout Latin Christendom in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, noting that “the Latin Christian community was not racially homogenous by any means” (87). This interspersion of Northeast Africans’ presence throughout Europe shows that there was engagement between these peoples, even outside of the Crusading lands.

According to Simmons, Prester John was said to live in Nubia until the thirteenth century when he seemed to move to Ethiopia. This shift coincides with the diminishment of Nubian power and the rise of Ethiopian (105). The name ‘Prester John,’ according to Simmons, likely originated from “a misinterpretation of the Gəʿəz word *ǧan*,” even though the myth likely was first located somewhere in Asia, before Latin Christians began focusing on Northeast Africa (106). The myth involved a ‘king of kings’ who would lead the Crusaders to victory over the Muslims. Simmons locates the earliest account during the Fifth Crusade (AD 1217–1221) when the Crusaders heard of a powerful unnamed Nubian ruler. This person desired “to rise up, destroy Mecca, and scatter the bones of the Prophet Muhammad. A century later, Nubia was explicitly being recorded as the home of Prester John . . . The later Latin Christian myth of an Ethiopian Prester John merely developed on its Nubian foundations” (108). Simmons shows that some Nubian kings carried the name ‘David’ (e.g. David II r. 1268–1276), which amplified the messianic elements. As Nubian power waned and Ethiopian waxed, Prester John’s home moved, so that from the 1360s he was explicitly identified as Ethiopian (117). As per Simmons’s thesis, the Prester John tradition shows that the Latin Christians, at least by the mid-twelfth century, were deeply invested in relations with Nubia and Ethiopia.

In the fifth chapter, Simmons discusses how the Latin Christians used their growing understanding of the Northeast African Christians. One of the responses was to send missionaries to preach against their ‘heretical’ ways, since the Nubians and Ethiopians were Jacobites, and thus, assumed to be in need of ‘conversion’. The earliest record of missionaries from Rome is in a letter sent by Pope Clement IV in 1267 to the Dominicans that identified the peoples to which they were sent as *Aethiopum* and *Nubianorum*. Another reaction to the knowledge of Northeast African Christians was political, which was largely impacted by the growing missionary efforts. As the Latin Christian missionary traffic increased, the Muslim rulers grew wary of a Nubian-Latin Christian alliance. According to later twelfth century sources, this alliance did not come to fruition. One such source recounts a Latin Christian fortress built on the

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island of Jazīrat Fir‘awn near Aqaba, which the Crusaders called Ile de Graye, and was built, according to Simmons, in 1160 and re-taken by the Muslims in 1171. This fortress account coincided “with early developing interest in the military prowess of Nubia and Ethiopia” (136) and was related to the “supposed ‘raid’ of Reynald of Châtillon on ‘Aidhāb in 1182-3” (138). The raid was likely part of the growing relations among Latin Christians with Nubians and Ethiopians, and was ultimately a failure. Records like this are evidence of the interactions between these groups in the Crusading period, which is essential for properly understanding this period of history.

Simmons then “aims to contextualise the histories of Dotawo and Ethiopia between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries within a regional dimension which was not isolated from the arrival of the Latin Christians and the establishment of the Crusader States” (157). The Muslim powers in Egypt were already increasing their southern defences, i.e., toward Nubia, likely anticipating an alliance with the Latin Christians. Simmons discusses a late twelfth century Nubian plaque found in Attiri. This plaque “depicts a dismounted military saint on one side with a protection prayer in Old Nubian to St. Epimachos on the reverse” (162). Simmons argues that this plaque reflects engagement with Latin Christians. Although little can be said for certain about this plaque, “but it certainly deserves a reassessment” from the isolated examination it has received (162–163). Regarding the lack of late fourteenth century sources, Simmons notes that the plague commonly called the ‘Black Death’ that ravaged Europe in the 1340s and 1350s had a major impact on the records of interactions. Also, Simmons notes that “it could, or indeed should, be expected that the plague had a similarly profound effect on Dotawo, particularly in Lower Nubia” (180). During the fourteenth century, Latin Christian attention was shifting to Ethiopia. Thus, for the Latin Christians, “a ‘new’ Ethiopia had replaced the ‘old’ Ethiopia of Nubia” (193). Unfortunately, sources are limited, if not lacking.

Simmons argues for a new approach to the sources on Latin Christians and Northeastern Africans, i.e., conjunctive study, rather than in isolation from each other. Simmons says that “these histories should no longer be viewed almost entirely in isolation and that the historiographical rejection of connections needs to be continually reassessed” (198). Simmons convincingly argues that collaborative study is needed on these sources, and that there is a substantial amount of textual support (albeit fragmentary and scattered) for relations between Latin Christians and Northeast Africans during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Therefore, anyone interested in the history of the Crusades should read this book.

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On a critical note, as much as his primary aim is to promote deeper study in this framework, he is unable to say anything with certainty. The textual evidence requires more analysis before anyone can make definitive statements. Thus, this book, as much as it is important, is anti-climactic. Stylistically, many sentences are lengthy which requires more energy to engage with the flow of thought.

Despite those critical points, Simmons succeeds in his stated aims. I hope that scholars of the history of the Crusades build on this work and produce more collaborative analyses. This book has demonstrated substantial evidence of interaction between Northeast Africans and Latin Christians, which requires more study. I echo Simmons's hopes, namely, that more work would be done on these texts in conjunction and not in isolation.



Covenant Refractions in Everyday Devotion

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Antohin, Alexandra Sellassie. *The Covenant's Veil: Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition of Elaboration. Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2025. Pp. xii + 198. US\$34.99.

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The author, of Ethiopian and Russian descent and raised within Orthodox Christian traditions, provides an ethnographic examination of the Christian devotional culture among adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwāḥādo* Church (EOTC).¹ The research presented in this work is primarily derived from field studies conducted in Dessie in north-central Ethiopia from 2010 to 2012, with additional investigations in Addis Ababa during subsequent years.

The ethnographic analysis encompasses five distinct forms of lay engagement: feast-day commemorations, gestures of prayerful respect, *tabot* narratives of miracles and resistance, *mahābār* and mutual-aid societies, and pilgrimages accompanied by vow-making. By focusing on the devotional practices of participants with limited formal church/theological education, the book endeavors to articulate a new way of defining the EOTC in contemporary times.

Central to the book is the exploration of Ethiopia's historical conception of covenant. This notion is intricately connected to the cultural and political contexts of Ethiopia and is rooted in the belief that the Ark of the Covenant

¹ Editors' note: *Tāwāḥādo* is a technical Ge'ez term, used also in modern Ethiopian languages such as Amharic and Tigrinya, that indicates the christology of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches, stating that Christ has a single, unified nature — fully divine and fully human. For more details, see the introductory editorial of this issue.

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resides in *Aksum Şeyon* (Aksum Zion).²

Antohin introduces the concept of “covenant refraction” to describe how the narratives surrounding the covenant serve as a reference point that inspires celebrants to expand and elaborate upon a network of meanings in their devotional practices. The author theorizes that these refractions “shape how they communicate and express their faith” (151), demonstrating the adaptability of the covenant concept through various devotional activities.

Chapter One discusses the concept of covenant, recounting the story of the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon, and their son Menelik. Drawing on the 14th-century text *Kəbre Nāgāsət* (Ge‘ez and Amharic: ‘Glory of Kings’), it explains the arrival of the ታቦተ ጸዮን (*tabotä Şeyon*, ‘Ark of the Covenant’) in Ethiopia, housed in a church known as Aksum Şeyon in northern Ethiopia. Scholars contend that *Kəbre Nāgāsət* was used or crafted as an instrument for the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty. Yekuno Amlak, claiming descent from Menelik I, overthrew the Zagwē kings who ruled from the tenth to thirteenth centuries.

This interpretation links the narrative of the Ark of the Covenant to the broader notion of covenant, establishing a close relationship between church and state. Consequently, the idea of covenant is used to maintain the status quo of the ruling elite. Furthermore, as Antohin argues, the Ark of the Covenant story “contributes to a broader discourse of national or religious exceptionalism,” framing Ethiopia as a “new Jerusalem” (24).

Chapter Two illustrates how the Ethiopian conception of covenant functions as a reservoir of cultural elaboration, exploring the centrality of *tabots* within the EOTC, particularly in relation to *Təməqāt* (the Feast of Epiphany), an occasion when adherents encounter the *tabot*. The chapter argues that *tabots* represent a refraction of Ethiopia’s covenant idea.³ During the *Təməqāt* celebration, all *tabots* are placed outside the church, allowing for public contact with these sacred objects.

Chapter Three centers on liturgy and gestures of respect, asserting that the liturgical service initiates a central activity of the EOTC that sets “the rhythm of their engagement as believers” (55). The author demonstrates how all refractions of the covenant idea manifest within the church’s liturgical services.

² Aksum, a city now in northeast Ethiopia, was the eponymous capital of the ancient kingdom of Aksum, which included modern Eritrea, northern Ethiopia, and parts of Yemen. It was an important Christian center in the patristic era, and the historical center of Ethiopian Christianity.

³ It is believed that the Ark of the Covenant is housed in the church of Aksum Tsiyon in Aksum. However, each Orthodox church hosts a replica of the ark, known as the *tabot*.

Chapter Four connects the covenant concept with the story of *tabots* ('material arks') and the miracles associated with them. Beyond the *tabot* in Aksum, various *tabots* in different churches are associated with social mobilization and acts of resistance. The author provides two illustrative examples: the defeat of the Italians at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, attributed to the *tabot* of St George accompanying King Menelik, and Emperor Haile Selassie's exile to Bath, England, during which he took the *tabot* of Medhane Alem (Savior of the World). Later, when the Ethiopians triumphed over Mussolini, the *tabot* of Medhane Alem returned to Ethiopia in celebration.

This section includes several *tabot* stories, highlighting how legends are interpreted or codified as "historical" by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Dessie and Addis Ababa. It reveals a consistent theme that portrays "Ethiopia as a land where the Ark of the Covenant rests as a people who are responsive to divine presence and agency" (73). The miracle genre characterizes many of these stories, illustrating how the church seeks to assert its cultural and political significance.

Chapter Five discusses *mahabär* ('communal devotional groups') and their associated blessings. A *mahabär* operates as a religious association characterized by membership, dues, a code of conduct, and collegiality among its members. The refraction of the covenant is evident within *mahabär*, as it serves as a domain for ideological elaboration, reinforcing the image of a "chosen people." *Mahabär* fosters spiritual kinship within Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, with diverse types existing that facilitate fellowship outside of the liturgy or other church compound activities.

The book contends that the *mahabär* is not merely a social club but is deeply embedded within the religious system and worldview, with its legitimacy stemming from the theological framework of the church, which the author refers to as covenant refractions.

The concluding chapter explores the movement of sacred promise, presenting vow-making as another form of covenant refraction. Pilgrimages motivated by vows are undertaken with the intent of invoking divine intervention into the routine lives of believers.⁴ The author uses the case study of *Mänəfasawi guzo* ('spiritual journey') to Gəšāne Mariam, situated 70 km from Dessie, which attracts many pilgrims annually in September. This church is revered as the resting place of a relic of the True Cross, which arrived in 1446. According to tradition, Queen Eleni, the mother of Emperor Constantine, vowed to locate the True Cross during the fourth century, conducting a year-

⁴ In Ethiopia, pilgrimages are most often motivated by vows. For example: "If you heal my mother, I will go to St Gabriel Church and offer a gift."

and-a-half long excavation that resulted in finding it in four pieces. As the tradition narrates, each piece of the cross was given to churches in Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem, with the right arm given to the Church of Alexandria. Subsequently, in the fifteenth century, as a reward for Ethiopian military cooperation, the relic of the True Cross was given to Ethiopia, where it has since remained at Gəšāne.

Throughout the book, the author seeks to demonstrate how the devotional culture of the EOTC “renders covenant refractions as part of a methodology of elaboration” (135). The book highlights the diverse ways in which EOTC members practice their religion, whether through participating in the Eucharistic liturgy on Sundays or feast days, or through small acts of devotion such as silent prayers and making the sign of the cross when passing by a church. Some individuals express their faith by undertaking pilgrimages to fulfill vows made during crisis or upon the due date of specific promises. Collectively, these practices reflect a constant manifestation of faith in everyday ordinary life.

Beyond a historical examination, the book emphasizes contemporary practices, shedding new insights into the understanding of the EOTC. It operates within a central Orthodox Christian framework, positing that the elaboration of tradition involves expanding, interpreting, and re-expressing existing beliefs, thereby enabling believers to maintain their connection to their roots. This connection is achieved not merely through the repetition of tradition but also by deepening it, building upon it, and adding layers of meaning in new contexts. The author’s elaboration of Church Tradition, along with the identification of its contexts, facilitates an understanding of how EOTC Christians conceptualize and articulate the covenant, both as narratives and as material expressions of God’s promise of protection.

Although there exists a substantive body of scholarship addressing the concept of covenant from historical and political philosophy perspectives, our understanding of how this concept influences the liturgical and social dynamics of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and their cultures remains limited. This study attempts to fill that gap and successfully accomplishes this goal. It effectively elaborates on how tradition is preserved and utilized meaningfully in everyday life, arguing convincingly that the EOTC is not static, simply hinging around ancient traditions; rather, it exemplifies a dynamic practice of living practice.

This book is an anthropological experiment that brings an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the EOTC by elaborating on how the covenant idea is refracted in the church. It is a valuable resource for scholars and non-specialists alike who seek to engage with the theology and practices of the EOTC.



Revitalizing and Reforming Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Mugambi, Kyama. *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya.* Waco, Texas, USA: Baylor University Press, 2020. Pp. 348 + xvii. US\$59.99 (hardcover).

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The growing story of Christianity in Africa is largely Pentecostal in nature. Yet discourses of Pentecostalism in Africa can tend towards simplistic generalizations or harsh criticisms that are usually blind to the varied textures, contributions and characteristics of Pentecostals in Africa. Dr Kyama Mugambi, Assistant Professor of World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, offers a Kenyan perspective noting the unique features of urban Pentecostalism, its historical antecedents and growth and its influence in shaping Christian leadership in Kenya. Several reasons stand out as to why Kyama is best suited to offer such an account. First is his scholarly heritage. Kyama is son to the religious scholar J. N. K. Mugambi, who has shaped religious, and we might add theological, scholarship in Kenya and throughout Africa. However, Kyama himself has been involved in theological scholarship in the continent in various and distinct ways: his PhD is in World Christianity from Africa International University in Nairobi, under the tutelage of the esteemed Mark Shaw; Kyama directed a publishing house called Africa Theological Network Press (ATNP) for several years; he now teaches and researches at Yale Divinity School, occupying the position of the late Lamin Sanneh. He is also a key figure in various networks of World Christianity such as the Yale-Edinburgh network and the Overseas Ministry Study Centre at Princeton. Second is his significant pastoral experience at *Mavuno* [kiSwahili: 'Harvest']. *Mavuno* is a Kenyan church well known as an urban church planting movement reaching out to the unreached in the city of Nairobi, and now with many churches in key global

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cities. As one of the founding pastors, Kyama has a distinct positionality compared to those who write about Pentecostalism from the outside.

Kyama begins with a clear thesis of retelling the unique story of African (Kenyan) Pentecostalism. Unlike previous critical scholars such as Paul Gifford, who see Christianity as “too self-absorbed to promote progress on a national scale” (3) or on the other side, scholars who focus on North American Pentecostalism, Kyama instead follows scholars like Ogbu Kalu and Walter Hollenweger to Africanize the discourse.¹ Kyama’s unique thesis is that urban Pentecostalism in Kenya retains the unique feature of:

A multigenerational faith engagement that stubbornly offers hope and security in the incessantly volatile, dynamic context on the continent . . . [Pentecostal churches] are not simply imitations of foreign church models but are, rather, relevant iterations of an indigenous Christianity whose history stretches back a century. The churches are historically connected to their predecessors by orality, kinship and African cosmology, three strands which I use to probe this continuity. (4)

Thus, the book looks at urban Pentecostalism in Kenya, and thus African Pentecostalism, through three different lenses, providing a close analysis of what Kyama considers to be “one of the most powerful sociocultural forces shaping the continent” (8).

To be sure, Kyama is also aware of some of “Pentecostalism’s potential for error” (9) which he lists as: First, blurring the boundaries of orthodoxy, for instance in the form of prosperity gospel or the lack of a robust theodicy that can ground Christians in the face of pain, evil, and suffering. Second, Pentecostalism’s close linkages with North American televangelism, which tends towards fundamentalistic Christianity foreign to addressing African social issues. This is seen in Pentecostal concepts such as *upako*, kiSwahili for ‘anointing’, that blindly focuses on the miraculous and supernatural without much emphasis on a practical Christian faith in daily life. Especially articulated in the emerging Word of Faith movement, several criticisms have been offered by African scholars and theologians as a remedy. Lastly, Pentecostalism’s over-spiritualization, while important in engaging with spiritual realities and forces of evil, can tend towards de-emphasizing “unjust societal structures or worldliness” (12) that define African economic and socio-political life. Kyama succeeds in providing a scholarly appraisal of the diversity of African Pentecostal expressions in terms of size, demographics, language, and liturgy. Following the late African missiologist Lamin Sanneh’s analysis of African

¹ E.g., see Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12; Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, Massachusetts, USA: Hendrickson, 1997), 54.

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Christianity, Kyama argues that the *Charismatic movement*, and he uses this term interchangeably with *Pentecostalism*,² has been a process of translating Christian truth in complex ways and in a manner that is “vibrant, missional and spiritually satisfying” (13).³

The Book’s Structure

The book is structured in a way that sustains this ‘African’ argument for Pentecostalism. In chapters 1 and 3, Kyama looks at the emergence of *Roho* (‘Spirit’) churches in early Kenyan Christianity and how they influenced later revivalist and student movements such as FOCUS Kenya. Chapter 1 pays attention to the charismatization debates within colonial-inherited churches, which he sees as a bridge between “African Traditional Religion worldviews and African Christianity” (18). He also considers the East African Revival Movement (EARM) of the 1930s, and its contribution to and distinction with the “Spirit-Roho” movement. Chapters 3 and 4 continue the historical perspective, noting the transition from “missionary dominance into indigenous leadership in historic mission churches” (18). The rise of student movements in the period between 1960 and 1970 facilitated a more cosmopolitan ethos beyond the monoculturalism of mission churches. Another key linkage with the African worldview, Kyama observes, is in orality seen in the practice of giving testimony, or *ushuhuda* (86). Like their Spirit-Roho forebearers, Mugambi argues that revivalist and student movements brought an important concern for the supernatural and miraculous, which mission churches ignored.

Kyama creatively observes the Kenyan post-independent context and identity seen through the slogans of *harambee* (‘let’s pull together’), *tujenge* (‘let us build’), and *pamoja* (‘together’). With this background, the rise of the Newer Pentecostal Churches (NPCCs) is seen as set in the heritage of the EARM and Spirit-Roho churches, but charting a new path, which Kyama says “sought to more fully explore kinship, orality, and holistic religion within the emerging urban context” (90). Kyama honors the parallel revivalistic streams within mission churches in the period, from 1970–1990, of Kenya’s struggle towards

² Other scholars further categorize these into “neo-Pentecostal” and “neo-charismatic” churches. E.g., see Martin Lindhardt, “Introduction: Presence of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa,” chapter 1 in *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*, edited by Martin Lindhardt, 1–53, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 10.

³ Kyama borrows this definition of translation from Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove, Illinois, USA: IVP Academic, 2010), 11, who in turn built on the work of Andrew F. Walls and of Lamin Sanneh.

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multi-partyism and the growth of more ecumenical responses through key figures in the mission historic churches such as the Anglicans Festo Olang' and David Gitari and the Presbyterians Timothy Njoya and John Gatũ. Kyama describes John Gatũ as a revivalist, noting his call for moratorium in the self-deterministic efforts of the indigenous-led Kenyan churches. Kyama also observes the connection between the NPCCs and the youth movements of the day, such as in the Youth Ambassadors Christian Fellowship (YACF) co-founded by key figures in the Pentecostal movement, that is, Joe Kayo, J. B. Masinde, and Mark Kariuki. Other Kenyan churches that fit this mold of the NPCC include the Redeemed Gospel Church (RGC) and Christ Coworkers Church (commonly known as CHRISCO) founded in Nairobi in 1978 by Harry Das (1930–2014), an Asian Indian from Guyana. Their key features are the evangelistic theology of the student movements, healing prayer sessions and ritualistic practices like the use of anointing oil, lack of formal liturgies and creedal statements, and glossolalia, aspects which were different from the historic mission churches.

Chapter 5 focuses on the discipleship approaches of Pentecostal and indigenous churches. Mugambi observes the baptismal practices of the *Akúrinú* and the *Mizizi* bible study that has been synonymous with Mavuno.⁴ I find it creative how Mugambi sees these as contemporary catechism methods in line with the historic church practices in the works of Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures*, Augustine's *Catechizing of the Uninstructed* and much later, the catechisms and confessions of the Reformed tradition, such as the 1563 Heidelberg catechism, the 1647 Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. However, Mugambi observes that the discipleship models of the Pentecostal churches added their pneumatology to these solid catechism manuals.

Chapter 6 provides the contribution of Pentecostal churches in leadership development of church leaders in the Pentecostal stream, through non-formal educational movements that focused on the giftings of leaders raised up by God. He does this by tracing the journey of one of Nairobi's well-known Pentecostal pastoral leaders, Toni Kiamah of River of God church, through interviews conducted with him. This chapter is informative in its consideration of theological education in Kenya's history by considering the beginning and growth of St Paul's University — which began as a center for training freed-slaves such as the first African student J. R. Deimler in 1888, to the foundation stone at Freire Town, Mombasa by H. K. Binns in 1903, and later as a United

⁴ The *Akúrinú* church, also known as the Holy Ghost Church of Africa, is an AIC founded within the Agikũyũ (Kikuyu) community in Kenya in the 1920s. *Mizizi* means 'roots' in Kiswahili and is the name of the locally produced contextual curriculum used by Mavuno.

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Theological College for the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK), Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA), Methodist Church of Kenya (MCK), and National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) affiliated churches. St Paul's has also trained church leaders from various indigenous, non-denominational, evangelical, and Pentecostal churches. This is an example of the historical strength of the book which, in addition to the archival research of the Church Missionary Society in London, engages with key scholars such as Dickson Nkonge, Esther Mombo, and John Chesworth. Mugambi also looks at Kinara, the pastoral internship program of Nairobi Chapel as an example of the nonformal leadership development that has shaped Pentecostal Christianity in Kenya.

The final two chapters focus on two case studies of influential Pentecostal churches: Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM) and Nairobi Chapel. Mugambi shows how CITAM's inception and development has been premised on combining the 'Pentecostal pneumatic impulse' with governance structures. The book presents Nairobi Chapel as an example of appropriating tools available to them, in this case the corporate language of "vision" and "mission" thereby bridging the secular-sacred divide so as to move forward in their missional calling in their urban cultural context that they minister to. Mugambi concludes by noting how his historical analysis casts light on three summative emphases of Pentecostal Christianity, at large, and in Kenya in particular — orality, kinship and holistic religion — as an "extraordinary journey of innovation, creativity, curation and revision on behalf of African people, an important instance of the process of translation and conversion in Christian history" (296).

Evaluation

Kyama Mugambi's *A Spirit of* has several strengths. First, it models a rigorous spirit of careful and creative scholarship. Mugambi uniquely combines sociological, historical, and critical analyses, engaging with a vast array of sources to support his argument. This creative scholarship is also bold in that it seeks to give a different yet informed narrative of Pentecostalism. Second, Mugambi's work is also beneficial to the larger study of African Christianity and even the mission historic churches. Mugambi provides helpful information of key figures in the 'mainstream tradition' such as Gitari, Njoya, and Gatũ, among others who are forerunners and examples of revivalists within Anglican and Presbyterian churches. This book would make wonderful reading especially if paired with John Gatũ's *Fan into Flame* and Timothy Njoya's, *We the People*, for a fuller account of Kenyan Christianity.⁵ Third, this book's tone, while

⁵ John G. Gatũ, *Fan into Flame: An Autobiography* (Nairobi: Moran Publishers, 2016); and

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critical, is constructive in nature. Kyama models the need, especially within the Pentecostal and mainstream debates, for nuanced conversation that moves beyond over-generalizations.

The book has two weaknesses. However, these weaknesses are likely based limitations of scope focusing on providing a historical analysis of Kenyan and urban Pentecostalism. First, I wish the book had expanded on the theology and praxis of urban Pentecostalism. While some of the historical material is unique compared to similar books written by western scholars, what would have been truly new would be a theological analysis of urban Pentecostalism in Kenya. Kyama speaks to some of these issues in bits and pieces throughout the book, but a thorough analysis would provide fodder for academic and lay discussion. For example, elsewhere I have sought to give a critical analysis of the theology and praxis of salvation in Pentecostal Christianity.⁶ This grows from some of the theological impulses discernible in urban Pentecostalism that tend to be reductionistic or overly-materialistic. Arguing in another line, while urban Pentecostalism has contributed to the lived realities of African (Kenyan) social, cultural, political, economic, religious, and spiritual life, does it also tend to focus on only singular aspects of doctrine? In some places, I find the analyses that ‘mainstream’ churches lack a pneumatic focus to be uneven. A quick glimpse at the confessions, catechisms and liturgical practices reveals a holistic pneumatology. Perhaps a middle ground would be to argue that Pentecostalism’s contribution is a focus on the continuationist position of the work of the Spirit, which I think is evident even in mainstream traditions. This brings me to my second point.

Next, I wish Kyama had given more attention to the Charismatization of mission churches. My positionality as a Presbyterian elder shows that a number of these emphases, which Kyama calls as unique in Pentecostalism, have become part of church practices within mainstream churches. Though Kyama does not fall into this error, frequently the terms ‘Pentecostal’, ‘mainstream’, and ‘mission historic’ churches usually serve to entrench certain stereotypes and generalizations, rather than capturing the nuanced and complex nature of African Christianities, both those in the ‘Pentecostal’ and ‘mainstream’ families. Using the kinship language that Kyama uses, I have a hunch that these nuances can provide an example of Christian unity and our shared family heritage rather than drawing wedges that are biased towards human tradition and a spirit of

Timothy Njoya, *We the People: Thinking Heavenly, Acting Kenyanly: A Memoir*, Foreword by Willy Mutunga (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2017).

⁶ Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, “An Exploration of Pentecostal Theology and Praxis of Salvation in Kenya,” chapter 20 in *Salvation in African Christianity*, edited by Rodney L. Reed and David K. Ngaruiya, 381–400 (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2023).

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disunity.

Following this comment, I posit that healthy, contextually and theologically robust African Christianities will emerge from learning from the positives in these two distinct approaches to African Christianities. While mainstream churches in urban centers have grown because of careful transformation of harmful or retrogressive traditions in line with spiritual discernment and charismatization, urban Pentecostal churches have matured through borrowing from the liturgical riches and ordered polity of the mainstream churches. Many within urban Pentecostal churches, for example, are now adorning liturgical vestments and using some form of liturgies in their services. As a practical theologian involved in significant youth work and preaching, I have noticed anecdotally that there are a lot of healthy borrowing and fellowship within Kenyan Christianity. Some Pentecostal churches and revivalist student movements are embracing the practices of expositional preaching which is a staple within the broadly reformed tradition. Likewise, preachers in mainstream churches are making use of story-telling and orality in a way that connects biblically rich sermons to everyday life issues. From a missiological perspective, while the two case studies of CITAM and Nairobi Chapel have contributed to urban and middle-class engagement, other mainstream churches have also contributed in a roundabout way. In the area of youth ministry for example, one of the first appointed youth pastors in the city of Nairobi was at the PCEA St. Andrew's church, an urban mainstream congregation. It is well known that many of the leaders in Pentecostal circles developed their Christian foundation in mainstream churches, as Kyama's own historical background shows. Mainstream churches have also successfully developed inculturated and contextualized theologies that have shaped their ministry within smaller towns and rural villages. Is there something urban Pentecostal churches can learn here, even as they share their urban missiology strengths with the Kenyan church at large? I find these as examples of a charitable approach to Christianity in Kenya, and which Kenyan Christianity can model for global Christianities and theological discourses. While much can be said by way of critiquing each other across the divides, this must be done in a tone of Christian love.

In conclusion, this book is beneficial for those looking for a thick description of urban Christianity in Kenya. The book makes for interesting reading, in terms of its diverse approaches: use of historical sources, contextual linguistic consideration, sociological analyses, personal narratives, and interviews — all of which coalesce to provide a thoughtful, rigorous and helpful text that can be used in a variety of ways and courses. It will make for a good textbook for courses on Pentecostalism, New Religious Movements, Practical Theology, Youth Ministry, Religion in Africa, Church History, Christian Formation, and Christian Leadership, to name but a few.



The Transformative Power of Grassroots Theologies

African voices shaping faith, spirituality, and praxis

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

White, Peter, ed. *Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis: Exploring Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches*. London: Routledge, 2025. Pp. 290 + xx. US\$59.99 (hardcover).

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Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis is described by **Afe Adogame** in the Foreword as comprehensive in its approach, providing a holistic understanding of the African theological landscape, and intended for scholars, theologians and practitioners. The book consists of eighteen chapters, divided into five themes:

1. *foundations and evolution of African theologies;*
2. *grassroots praxis, socio-economic impact, and social justice;*
3. *spirituality, healing and music;*
4. *theological identity and cultural integration;* and
5. *theological shifts, comparative and interface studies.*

These five themes serve as an outline for my review. The book successfully brings together “a robust, diverse range of voices to explore the theological reflections and interpretations emanating from the African context, which is a testament to this rich theological landscape” (Afe Adogame, xvi), being “made up of contributions that explore the dynamics of faith, spirituality and praxis in African grassroots theology and churches” (Peter White, 3). Four questions guide the book’s conversation:

1. How African grassroots theology and churches reflect and respond to the challenges and opportunities of their socio-political, economic, cultural and religious contexts;
2. How they engage with the historical and contemporary expressions of Christianity in Africa and beyond;

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3. How they develop and communicate their theological and ethical practices; and lastly,
4. How does it shape and challenge the forms and functions of the church in Africa?

In his “Introduction—Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis: Dynamics in African Grassroots Theologies and Churches,” **Peter White** provides information on the research gap the book intends to address, the methodologies utilized by the authors, the theoretical framework that is centred around African grassroots theologies, faith and spirituality in the African context, and the praxis in theology. This chapter also outlines how the chapters are organized, which makes it a user-friendly book, not just for those in the academic audience, but for all interested in the audiences of the church and society, many of whom struggle with questions around what it means to be a Christian in the African context today. As White rightly points out, the book is a collective narrative that weaves a tapestry as vibrant and diverse as the continent itself, demonstrating the transformative power grassroots theologies have in socio-economic realms and social justice, with potential for faith to inspire community and societal upliftment.

In chapter 2, “Unraveling the Roots and Theological Evolution of African Initiated Churches,” **White** unravels the roots and theological evolution of the African Initiated Churches (AICs), describing them as churches that were not founded by missionaries but emerged during the colonial period when black converts to Christianity could not reconcile their beliefs with those of their church leaders and thus split from them. There are various reasons for these splits, ranging from the socio-political and economic (to escape white control), the marginalization of the black race,¹ the euro-centric disposition of the Western missionaries and mainline churches in Africa, and the need for contextualization of Christianity in Africa among others. White gives an overview of the different (typologies) of AICs (Ethiopian, Zionist, Spirit-types, and Messianic churches, identifying a shift from Western dominated interpretation of Christianity towards an African centered one, and appreciating its transformative role.

Thomas A. Oduro describes the emergence of an African grassroots ministry and praxis from the life and contextual ministry of Prophetess Agnes Amanye Okoh of the Christ Holy Church International in Nigeria in chapter 2,

¹ Editors’ note: *Race* only exists as a social construct. The modern idea and theory of *race* is unscientific, unbiblical, and anti-Christian. As a social construct, however, it has of course been historically powerful. While ethnocultural distinctives exist and should be celebrated, we should recognize that both scientifically and theologically, there is only a single human race.

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“African Grassroots Ministry and Praxis: A Study of the Life and Contextual Ministry Approaches of Prophetess Agnes Amanye Okoh and the Christ Holy Church International.” The origins and development of Prophetess Okoh’s ministry’s is shown to be an example of how a particular grassroots theology developed, and how she employed practices familiar to Africans to minister and interpret the Bible.

In chapter 4, “African Indigenous Methods for Christian Mission and Theology in Contemporary Africa,” **Humphrey M. Waweru** provides a theological understanding of the importance of African indigenous methods for Christian mission and theological development in Africa. The most important indigenous tool identified by Maweru is the use of African languages in mission which promote literacy. Vernacular languages are also a useful tool to loosen control of the Western academy on the production of knowledge in Africa and to develop local hermeneutic strategies relevant to their contexts. Such readings are collective, contextual, and based on the interdependence and the interconnectedness of the readers’ cultures. African indigenous methods in Bible interpretation locates African heritage as an agent not as the other, addressing various issues like patriarchy, Afrocentricity, and de-ideologization of the Bible as a book for the middle class. The aim is not to negate already existing Western methods, but to generate and create new knowledge relevant to the African context.

In chapter 5, **Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh**’s “The Role of Water in the Gospel of John and Its Echo in Prophetic Ministries in Africa: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation” provides a socio-rhetorical interpretation of water in the gospel of John and how it is re-appropriated in prophetic ministries in Africa. After a thorough exegesis of John 2:1–12, Aryeh finds that Jesus did not just solve a shortage of wine problem, but that this text implies that Jesus can be invited to socio-cultural events, not just to those who are religious. In an evangelistic sense it attracts followers to Jesus, but present Jesus also as the one who can miraculously provide their existential needs. The use of water in the narrative “portrays a unique theology of water that miracles are not limited to deeds of healing, exorcism, etc. but the supply of consumables during joyous occasions” (66). Water is offered in prophetism in Africa; given to aid miracles and used as a medium of communication between spirits and deities. The narrative of Jesus converting water into wine to meet an existential need is welcome in the African context, a form of grassroots theology performed by prophets. It makes the biblical passage a lived narrative, a contextualized version of the use of water.

In “Nigeria’s Neo-Pentecostals’ Religious Creativity and Innovations through the Lens of Indigenous Ontology in the Development of Grassroot Theologies,” **Babatunde Adedibu** investigates the religious creativity and

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innovation of Nigeria's Neo-Pentecostals, and how that contributes to the development of grassroots theology. Grassroots theology is understood as the democratization of theology, with the view that every Christian can reflect and is thus a theologian, irrespective of their educational level. This is in line with Oduro, who emphasized in the third chapter that Prophet Agnes Okoh was an illiterate woman who founded a church under God's instruction. In the African context, reading the Bible through an ontological lens is practical, functional, and contextual, not founded on written creeds or teachings, but an oral Christology, based on tradition. Adedibu shows how Neo-Pentecostals appropriate indigenous beliefs and turn them into socio-religious views that resonate with the lived experiences of people, thus attracting large membership, and that have popular styles of worship and innovative strategies as "pastorpreneurs." Their engagement with invisible cosmological forces in everyday life resonates with the biblical view and incorporates a holistic ontology that is attractive in the African context.

In chapter 7, **Benson Ohihon Igbion** (2025:89) engages faith and spirituality as social-spiritual epistemology in the practices of Nigerian Pentecostalism in "Faith and Spirituality as Knowing, Being, and Doing in Nigerian Pentecostalism." He emphasizes the importance of grounding faith and spirituality more in doing than in knowing, deployed in the socio-economic and political spheres through violent prayer. After explaining how faith is both universal and relational, and how it forms an empirical and epistemological basis for developing and making meaning, Igbion explains how faith becomes an expression of trust in the invisible demonstrated in existential affairs. Spirituality is made possible through the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit, with faith as the foundation of spirituality, connecting faith as knowing, spirituality as being, and religion as doing. Igbion highlights how such a Pentecostal spirituality extends to political association and political friendships that transcend boundaries of race and ethnicity, although competition among them sometimes threatens it. Power is conceived both spiritually and politically: a this-worldly approach to human flourishing rather than a hereafter one. Dominion in those areas are achieved through violent prayer, an apocalyptic device used to contest, disband, disrupt, destroy, and overthrow spiritual agencies that menace the social lives of believers. Such prayers ensure personal deliverance but not socio-political redemption.

Chapter 8 is "Reconnoitering Sierra Leone Christians' Theological Perspective of '*Na So God Want*': A Contextual Grassroots Interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 5:18." **Prince Sorie Conteh** engages the theological perspective of the will of God (*na so God want*, 'God orchestrates all that happens in life') in the context of Sierra Leone. The frequently quoted 1 Thessalonians 5:18 commands believers to "give thanks to God in everything, for it is the will of

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God in Christ Jesus.” Conteh reports some findings on how the text shapes the spiritual and social engagement of Sierra Leonian Christians. On questions posed to participants from four churches about their interpretation of the text, how they reconcile this belief in the will of God with misfortune, and how it affects their lives socially, some interesting results came out. All of the participants revere the Bible as the word of God, find inspiration in the text as uplifting news, and acknowledge the statement *Na so God want* as the sovereign plan of God for individuals and communities. For Conteh this leads to a fatalistic mindset, resulting in their not seeking solutions to challenges, which impacts how they see their socio-economic and political rights and results in a perceived inability to act.

Chapter 9, “Grassroots Theological Praxis and Socio-Economic Contributions: A Case of the Saviour Church of Ghana,” is written by **Peter White** and **Peter Boakye**. It provides a comprehensive narrative of the Savior Church of Ghana, focusing on its grassroots theology and practice and its socio-economic impact. The story starts with the vision that the first General Superintendent, Opanyin² Samuel Brako, received that Saturday was God’s Day of rest and worship. Through a long line of leaders that stretches over 100 years, the Savior Church has grown to become an indigenous church whose theology is rooted in the saving power of Jesus Christ, and that is manifested in various practices such as communal worship, prayer, and commitment to socio-economic development and healthcare. The aim of the church was not just to secure individual salvation for church members, but instilled in them “a sense of discipline, honesty, hard work, and mutual respect, which are essential for community living” (137).

Another church, the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe (UCCZ), developed grassroots strategies to address issues of poverty, as outlined in “Faith at the Frontiers of Poverty: A Study of the Grassroots Praxis of United Church of Christ Communities in Southeastern Zimbabwe” by **Robert Matikiti**, who reports on their comprehensive support to the community. After explaining why the reconstruction model of Jesse Mugambi³ is needed in the aftermath of

² *Opanyin* is a title given to elderly males in the Akan language in Ghana.

³ Editors’ note: See J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995); Mugambi, *Religion and Social Construction of Reality* (Nairobi University Press, 1996); Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction*, Theology of Reconstruction (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003); Mugambi, ed., *Christian Mission and Social Transformation* (Nairobi: NCKK, 1989); Mugambi, ed., *The Church and Reconstruction of Africa: Theological Considerations* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1997); Mary N. Getui, Emmanuel A. Obeng, and J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, eds., *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1999); Jose B. Chipenda,

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missionary Christianity in Africa, Matikiti describes in broad terms the innovative strategies developed by the UCCZ, that moved beyond paternalistic approaches to more income generating practices (that included poultry farming, tilling, planting, irrigating, weeding, and harvesting), to secure sustainable development. Matikiti brings contextualization and indigenization together by adapting and utilizing African concepts and ideas, to mould a distinctly African Christianity.

Nomatter Sande challenges the Church's involvement in society to move beyond than just being a development agent to also bringing about social change through protest theology. In chapter 11, "Protest Theology: A Hope to Fight Injustices in Zimbabwe's Socio-Political Context," he studies the profile of Apostle Farai Talent Chiwenga, particularly how Chiwenga uses a "street gangster approach" (154) through his church and social media as a platform to criticize the Zimbabwean government and the state of Christianity. Although Apostle Chiwenga is in some instances a controversial figure, **Sande** detects in his statements a protest theology in which religious leaders advocate a new social theology that challenges society. It is a grassroots form of theology that calls for the re-establishment of sound social relations, affirms the dignity of the members of society, encourage people to find local solutions for their problems and active engagement with social justice in society. In such a process, the relationship between religion and politics is not always predictable, but the options are between support and resistance. Sande concludes that "the church's importance in maintaining a nation's political and moral conscience . . . brings a balance in countering injustices and abuse of power and provides checks and balances in the governing process" (166).

In Chapter 12, "*Iyi Na Wɔdze Frɛ Sunsum*': Spiritism and Musical Healing in the Twelve Apostles Church in Ghana," Amos Darkwa Asare delves into the role that music plays in indigenous healing practices, focusing on the *Mfoba*, a Ghanaian sacred musical instrument. The *Mfoba* is believed to facilitate and mediate interaction between healers, patients, worshippers, and spirits. Asare asserts that due to the Pentecostal understanding of the Holy Spirit, and its role in spiritual warfare, the groundwork for African Independent Churches was laid that integrates Ghanaian indigenous values and structures into their worship. The chapter unravels the nuanced musical expressions and their role in

André Karamaga, J. N. K. Mugambi, and C. K. Omari, *The Church of Africa: Towards a Theology of Reconstruction* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1991); and Isaac T. Mwase and Eunice K. Kamaara, eds., *Theologies of Liberation and Reconstruction: Essays in Honour of Professor Jesse N. K. Mugambi* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2012).

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traditional healing practices. Prophets and prophetesses do not claim healing power by themselves but attribute it to the divine influences of the Holy Spirit.

Continuing the theme of Spirituality, Healing, and Music, in chapter 13 **Genevieve Nrenzah** explores theological themes in secular music, considering how music serves as a soulful language. Nrenzah analyzes three case studies to support her claim that although secular music that is not religious in nature, being concerned with worldly issues, it also contains religious themes. Music in the Ghanaian context provides soulful language that expresses deep-seated beliefs and values. The three songs studied represent a part of the Ghanaian people's faith and lived experience, woven together in a web of cultural diversity and harmony. This chapter illustrates the role of music in preserving cultural heritage, expressing religious sentiments, and cultivating communal identity among grassroots communities.

Chapter 14 contributes to our understanding of African spirituality and theologies in diasporic and transnational contexts, as **Ruth Vida Amwe** narrates the origins and development of the Bethel Presbyterian Reformed Church (BPRC) in America. BPRC came to exist in part through the lived experiences of congregants who wanted to express their Ghanaian culture and identity. Amwe reports on the role that women played in the origin and development of the church. The chapter agitates for African immigrant religious spaces to construct individual and communal identity and belonging and appreciates its potential to produce grassroots theologies that transform the religious and social landscape.

Jacob Mokhutso examines "The Integration of the African Philosophy of *Ubuntu* into John Wesley's Theology of Social Holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA): A Black African Perspective" in chapter 15. He argues that the two concepts of ubuntu and social holiness are intrinsic to the identity and mission of the church in Africa. After a thorough evaluation of the doctrine of social holiness in the Wesleyan tradition, and its implications not just for personal but also for societal relationships, especially in the realization of human equality, freedom, equity, and equality in the use of natural resources, Mokhutso relates social holiness to missionary Christianity. The similarities between ubuntu and social holiness are explored — especially how they are expressed at the grassroots level through certain ecclesial practices related to baptism, death and bereavement, funerals, and the overall diaconal involvement of the MCSA. The chapter incorporates Christian and African epistemologies, not only to influence but also to shape and enrich the faith, spirituality, and praxis among black African Methodists at grassroots levels.

Rhodian Munyenyeembe outlines in chapter 16 the shift that took place in the Church of the Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), from its reformed

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theological roots to its charismatic spirituality renewal, which can be described as a mismatch between the historical identity of the CCAP and the contemporary experiences of denominations in the Synod of Livingstonia. Steeped in Reformed theology, tradition and spirituality, in which there are no altar calls and a structured and routine liturgy is followed with no space for spontaneous emotional expression during worship services, the CCAP was confronted by, and embraced over time, a charismatic spirituality. Munyenembe points out how both traditional modes of worship and this charismatic style became part of the CCAP identity; generational dynamics were a strong consideration behind the shift. Munyenembe also discusses certain challenges that come with a charismatic renewal: intergenerational concerns, ways of giving like tithing and/or pledges, and uncritical embracing of secular cultures like materialism. A positive side to these developments is that it shows the church's ability to contextualize the gospel to address the needs of believers.

In chapter 17, **Kelebogile Thomas Resane** addresses the issue of dubious faith among African Christians, who turn to traditional African religious practices in ways that challenges Christian monotheism. Resane specifically examines the growing rise of "sangomaism" in a multireligious (South) African context. *Sangoma*, an anglicization of the isiZulu term *isángoma*, can mean 'healer', 'diviner', 'ritual expert', or 'witch doctor'; in South Africa, sangomas are practitioners of African traditional medicine who also practice divination. Resane's central argument is that demographics will always shift but acknowledgement of God's unity should always persist and given the religious pluralistic nature of Africa (calabash or melting pot), it appears sometimes difficult.

The concept of God is further explored interculturally and interreligiously by **John Nat Tucker** in chapter 18, "Divine Interfaces: A Comparative Study of the Concept of God in Christian and Traditional Mende and Temne Beliefs in Sierra Leone." Tucker explores the similarities and differences between Christianity and the traditional religious views of the Temne and Mende ethnic groups in Sierra Leone. Both **Resane** (chapter 17) and Tucker find the worship of a Supreme Being as central in the religious they study, but when it comes to deities and divinities that serve as mediaries between the divine, the spirit world, humans, and nature those religions differ greatly. These final two chapters lay bare the dual affiliation and double faith experienced by many Christians in the African context.

Conclusion

Peter White and the other contributors to *Faith, Spirituality and Praxis* present a tapestry of African grassroots theologies that testify to the complexity

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of the lived experiences (praxis) of African Christians in different parts of Africa. Their reflections on grassroots African theologies from the perspectives of the Bible, the continued legacies of missionary Christianity in the present, and the possibilities such theologizing holds for faith and spirituality in the future helps to bridge the distance between indigenous knowledges and so-called formal Western education by their appreciation for the wisdom embedded in the diverse local African contexts. The book also engages critically with dehumanizing beliefs and practices that undermine the dignity and value of African Christians.



Creating Community Identity in Matthew's Gospel Narrative

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Tekalign Duguma Negewo. *Identity Formation in the Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Narrative Reading.* Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe (WUNT II) 605. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023. Pp. ix + 222. €84.00.

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Tekalign Duguma Negewo is lecturer in New Testament at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology in Addis Ababa and Exegetical Advisor at Wycliffe Ethiopia. According to his preface, *Identity Formation in the Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Narrative* is a revision of Tekalign's doctoral dissertation from Stellenbosch University. The author believes that Matthew wrote his Gospel to address the *Sitz im Leben* (life setting, context, or current issues) of readers with the intention that the Gospel would have a formative impact on them.

From the introduction, Tekalign premised his work on the assumption that Matthew's Gospel played a key role in forming the identity of the Matthean community, made up of Jews (Judeans) and Gentiles (non-Judeans). On the recipients, Tekalign does not parrot the assumption that the Gospel of Matthew was written to a specific community, which is "a product of too much guess work" (3). His submission is that both Matthew and the other Gospels had in mind the wider community of first-century Christians in general with general identity-forming roles. This means that the authors of the Gospels anticipated a wider circulation of their writings among Christians throughout the Mediterranean world. This "ideal readers' community" (1) does not replace Israel. Rather, it is a reconstituted Israel based on Israel's traditions. This group permitted non-Judeans to be part of the community and to share her messianic blessings. Tekalign's posture rejects the recycled view that there was a distinct extant community in a specific locality to whom Matthew wrote his gospel. He opted for social identity theory to examine the identity formation process for the Matthean community. This informed the choice of socio-narrative reading

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as against other methods such as historical-critical, literary critical, socio-scientific, narrative critical, and semiological (meaning-making using signs and symbols) readings. According to Tekalign, those methods fall short of adequate elucidation of how the text was intended to be received by its implied readers.

Divided into eight chapters, the author probes how Matthew wrote to form the identity of his readers. The first chapter surveys the history of research on the subject. This historical quest borders on identity formation (how Matthean community identified herself); Matthean community (or the community behind the Gospel), using historical-critical method and literary criticism; functions of the Gospel of Matthew (teaching or catechetical manual, liturgical handbook, a biography, or identity shaping manual); and the Gospel and non-Jews. Tekalign believes that an integrative approach is appropriate in investigating the identity formation of the Gospel of Matthew. Chapter 2 examines the socio-narrative reading of the Gospels. This is a combination of literary and social studies aimed at seeing the Gospel account as “mythmaking and an identity-forming effort” (69). Tekalign uses social identity construction theory to show how the implied author created the identity of the ideal readers’ community by comparing them with the others, the non-Judeans in general. According to Tekalign, the Gospel of Matthew is a myth with the aim of creating the identity of its readers. Tekalign distinguishes between *myth* and *fiction* because Matthew has historical reference in mind. Matthean use of myth is a means of disseminating ideology. But if myths are not necessarily historically correct, their authenticity and reliability remain questionable.

Chapter 3 examines the negative stereotyped non-Judeans in the Matthean narrative. This traces the boundaries between Judeans and non-Judeans in the Second Temple as reflected in some passages of Matthew that portray the non-Judeans in a negative light such as the Gadarenes (Matt 8:32–34), Pilate (Matt 27:1–6, 62–66), and the Roman soldiers (Matt 27:27–28:15). The concept of τὰ ἔθνη (*ta ethnē*)¹ here denotes “otherness” or those who do not belong both by status and behavior (83). Chapter 4 is about non-Judeans, primarily in Matthew’s genealogy. Tekalign’s argument here is that the inclusion of the four non-Judeans — Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba the wife of Uriah — in the genealogy demonstrates the assimilation and inclusion of these women into the people of God and thus serves as a polemic against the Judeans who considered themselves a pure race based on assumptions of genealogical purity (89). It is a redefinition of the people of God, showing that proselytization is not the only way of becoming part of the community or receiving the blessings brought by

¹ This Greek phrase literally means ‘the peoples’ but generally is used to refer to “people groups foreign to a specific people group.” BDAG, s.v. “ἔθνος,” 2.

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the Messiah. In chapters 5–7, the Magi in Mathew's account (Matt 2:1–12), the healing of the Roman Centurion's servant (Matt 8:5–13), and the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter (Matt 15:21–28) all indicate that in the ideal Matthean community, non-Judeans participate in Messianic blessings. The book concludes with summary and recommendations in chapter 8.

By way of appraisal, this book has many merits. The author is right that the Gospel of Matthew is a manifesto demonstrating that the reconstituted community, made up of Judeans and non-Judeans, is a full realization of the messianic expectations. Likewise, the author has painstakingly engaged scholars with wide range of theological persuasions. Similarly, the author made a paradigm shift from older historical-critical method with the assumptions that Matthew's Gospel was addressed to a distinct extant community in a specific locality. He believes that Matthew's audience is the wider community of first-century Christians in general. Another credit for this book is its spotlight on identity formation in the Gospel of Matthew — an aspect which is often ignored in scholarship. In line with Tekalign, my own thesis is that all the gospel writers wanted to construct their new self-identity according to the teachings, values, and beliefs received from their Lord, Jesus Christ. But our point of departure is his view on Matthew as a construction of identity through mythology. Finally, his concept of the ideal readers' community which is not to be regarded as a replacement for Israel but a reconstituted Israel founded on Israel's traditions is a good recipe against anti-Semitism.

The merits above notwithstanding, my first critical concern about this book is the author's choice of nomenclature, beginning with "Judeans" and "non-Judeans" in place of "Jews" and "Gentiles." The author acknowledged that most scholars go for the latter rendering, that is, Jews and Gentiles. Tekalign's choice of Judeans is based on how best the words Ἰουδαῖος (*Ioudaios*) and ἔθνος (*ethnos*) could be translated. The author admits that the former term was better understood as *ethnic Judeans* in the first century rather than as *religious adherents of Judaism*. But since "Judeans" would generally be understood as inhabitants of a region in Southern Israel, the use of *Judeans* would seem to exclude Jews outside Judea or in the diaspora. Therefore, to invent a term only for the sake of innovation is unjustified.

My second critique is based on personal observation that the author seems to have leaned heavily on liberal terminologies, ideas, and conclusions regarding the composition and identity formation of Matthew's Gospel. The author states categorically that Matthew's Gospel is a myth intended to fabricate the identity of its readers. He says Burton Mack's theory of myth creation and identity formation fits his own theory. This could imply that Matthew's Gospel must be

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demythologized for its relevance and not its historical authenticity.² This method of viewing the gospel narratives runs against the grain of conventional evangelical theology; the Gospel of Matthew is cast in the mold of subjective ideologies rather than objective narrative. While the author is entitled to his views, his posture seems to have eroded the credibility of Gospel of Matthew and his book for evangelical readers.

Nonetheless, the depth of scholarship demonstrated in the book is commendable. By his notes and bibliography, the author has provided a rich tapestry of resources for further discussion on identity formation in the Gospel of Matthew.

² Editors' note: As acknowledged on p. 366, "Tekalign distinguishes between *myth* and *fiction*." In common usage, a *myth* is "a widely held but false belief or idea," "a misrepresentation of the truth," or "a fictitious or imaginary person or thing." *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. "myth," 2. But in literary criticism, *myth* does not refer to idolatrous mythology or to "a false belief." Rather, *myth* as a technical term refers to a narrative that has the power to reveal truth. (See John M. Alexander, "Myth as an Organizing Principle for a Literary Curriculum," *CEA Critic* 41, no. 3 (1979): 32–38, p. 33). Tekalign uses *myth* in this latter sense and he certainly recognizes the factual character of Matthew's account. Thus it can be correct to refer to Matthew's Gospel as *mythic* — the gospel narratives certainly have the power to reveal truth — but from a Christian perspective, referring to Matthew as *mythological* (and therefore presumably nonfactual) suggests unbelief. It is, of course, always potentially confusing when a technical use of a term has a different meaning than its customary usage.



Polyphonic Readings

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Sofanit T. Abebe, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Abeneazer G. Urga, eds.
Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives. Library
of New Testament Studies 700. London: T&T Clark, 2024, 2026. Pp xvi
+ 216. £85.00 / US\$115.00 (hardback); £28.99 / US\$39.95 (paperback).

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Welile Mazamisa once asked, in the context of South African biblical hermeneutics during the 1980s, *What does it mean to read the Bible from this place?*¹ This deceptively simple question continues to resonate, not least because of its enduring challenge to interrogate how location, history, culture, and power shape both our interpretative questions and our theological conclusions. It provides a fitting point of entry into *Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives*, a richly textured volume that offers a sustained and multi-vocal exploration of how these New Testament texts are received and reimagined in diverse contexts across the so-called ‘majority world’.

As a Zimbabwean-born South African scholar who now works in a European university, I find myself embodying the tensions and gifts that come with reading the scriptures with varieties of people from multiple “places.” I inhabit the inheritance of African interpretive traditions while also engaging daily with Euro-American critical scholarship. These hybrid positionalities generate both opportunities and responsibilities. This book spoke deeply into those complexities. It is an important scholarly contribution, one that I have already found myself recommending to students and colleagues alike.

¹ Welile Mazamisa, “Reading from this place: From orality to literacy/textuality and back,” *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* 9 (1991): 67–72, <https://doi.org/10.7833/9-0-1969>; see also my “Reading from this place? A personal reckoning with whiteness and Bible scholarship,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81, no. 2 (2025): Article 10702, 8 pages, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i2.10702>

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The editors position the volume against a background in which Hebrews and 1 Peter have received relatively little attention within ‘majority world’ scholarship. Whereas the Gospels, Acts, and Pauline epistles have attracted considerable contextual readings from such locations, these two letters have been somewhat less frequently engaged. Addressing this lacuna is a key achievement of this collection. It does so, however, in a way that also destabilises older assumptions about the geography and ownership of biblical scholarship itself.

The introductory chapter by **Grant LeMarquand** highlights a fundamental shift underway in global biblical studies. Simply stated, we cannot think of the Bible as a possession of Western scholarship or Western institutions. It is a series of texts of and for the whole church, and this is particularly true given the demographic transformation of global Christianity. The centre of gravity has shifted decisively towards the ‘majority world’, and with it has come a growing plurality of interpretive approaches. These essays testify to the vitality of that plurality. They set out not to reproduce Western readings within ‘majority world’ settings but rather to stage conversations that begin in, and are accountable to, particular cultural, historical, and religious contexts. In this respect, the volume gestures towards what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni has described as the difference between a “university in Africa” and an “African university.”² The distinction matters, for it reminds us that location is not incidental to knowledge production.

Majority World scholars often come to the biblical text with questions, emphases, and existential concerns that differ from those typically foregrounded in Euro-American critical frameworks. The essays here reflect that dynamic, whether through sustained attention to themes of suffering, migration, and hope, or by drawing upon ancient interpretative traditions that continue to shape ecclesial and cultural practices. In doing so, the volume affirms that contextuality is not an optional hermeneutical lens but an unavoidable reality for all interpreters, whether in Accra, Addis Ababa, Kuala Lumpur, Santiago, or Edinburgh (I would like to add, even Cape Town or Amsterdam!)

One can organise the essays into several typological clusters, which also helps to frame the contributions.

The first group centres on Ethiopia, reflecting both the backgrounds of two of the editors and the deep historical resources of Ethiopian Christianity.

² Busani Mpofu and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “The Changing Idea of the University in Africa,” chapter 1 in *The Dynamics of Changing Higher Education in the Global South*, edited by Busani Mpofu and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 14–30 (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 21.

Abeneazer Urga explores the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahido* Church's longstanding affirmation of Pauline authorship of Hebrews (even though he holds a different view, he faithfully represents the tradition). This position stands in contrast to the almost unquestioned certainties of modern Western scholarship and invites us to revisit the interplay between ancient reading traditions and contemporary critical inquiry. **Nebeyou Terefe**, by contrast, interrogates the translation of ἐντυγχάνειν (*entugkhánein*) in Hebrews 7:25 in the Amharic Millennium Bible, where "intercede" has been translated as "judge." He shows clearly how doctrinal commitments can shape, and at times distort, translation choices. **Yimenu Adimass Belay** focuses on 1 Peter's theology of suffering and salvation, explicating how the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition emphasises the future dimension of salvation that remains contingent upon faithful perseverance.

A second set of contributions arises from other African contexts. **Axolile Qina** reads Hebrews as a Xhosa person doing his research in Edinburgh focussed on the tradition of animal sacrifice. He argues that the sacrificial logic of African religio-cultural practices prepares the ground for understanding Jesus' once-for-all offering — a generative and insightful approach. **Alice Nsiah** and **Gifty Dei Dawson** reimagine Rahab's story in Hebrews 11:31 in conversation with the experiences of female sex workers on Ghanaian university campuses. They draw provocative parallels between Rahab's agency in securing salvation for her family and the resilience of contemporary women negotiating marginalisation and stigma.

Several chapters emerge from Asia, each bringing distinctive cultural resources to bear upon the text. **Chakrita Saulina** interprets Jesus's victory over sin, death, and demonic forces in Hebrews through the Batak concept of *Sahala* (spiritual power), articulating a robust *Christus Victor* model that resonates with Batak cosmologies of spiritual warfare. **Jacob Chengwei Feng** explores Watchman Nee's theological anthropology, particularly his tripartite view of humanity grounded in Hebrews 4:12. He places Nee's (critically contested) insights within broader Chinese intellectual traditions. **Roji Thomas George** reflects on persecution in South Asia, reading 1 Peter alongside the lived realities of Christians navigating hostility and vulnerability. **Kar Yong Lim** turns to the challenges faced by Malaysian Christians as religious minorities, offering a constructive retrieval of 1 Peter's portrayal of believers as "aliens and exiles" and inviting fresh consideration of Christian witness in plural societies.

From Latin America, **Nelson Morales Fredes** offers a powerful meditation on migration and solidarity, drawing on Hebrews to affirm Jesus' identification with human suffering and displacement. His essay challenges churches in Chile and beyond to embody practical compassion towards immigrants and refugees.

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The volume concludes with an essay by **Marie-Josée Fortin** on Quebec, which, although not geographically part of the ‘majority world’, shares the experience of living as a minority Christian community within an aggressively secular environment. Fortin draws sensitive parallels between the original audience of Hebrews and contemporary believers in Quebec who struggle to maintain visible expressions of faith.

When taken together, these essays reveal the richness of interpretative diversity while also highlighting areas for further engagement and conversation. LeMarquand notes that future scholarship in this vein would benefit from deeper engagement across various ‘majority world’ contexts. There is a need for these diverse readings to enter into sustained dialogue, offering correctives and insights to one another rather than only responding to Western scholarly paradigms. At the same time, the volume invites ‘majority world’ scholars to maintain critical interaction with Western exegetical traditions, recognising both their limitations and their ongoing contributions. Finally, LeMarquand raises an important caution in his introduction to the project. Namely, that contextual readings must not lose sight of the text itself. While attending to the lived realities of readers is critical, one should be cautious of drifting towards forms of overt anthropocentrism or parochialism at the expense of engaging the theological claims of texts and their worlds.

To my mind, this volume achieves a rare balance. It honours the biblical text while allowing diverse contexts to shape the interpretative encounter. It gives voice to traditions and communities too often marginalised within the dominant historiographies of biblical studies. The essays are well-chosen, the scholarship is rigorous, and the theological insights are profound.

For those working on Hebrews or 1 Peter, this book is indispensable. Yet its significance reaches further. It models a kind of biblical scholarship that is globally accountable and contextually located, refusing both the hegemony of Western critical norms and the temptation towards insularity. I expect it will become a standard resource in postgraduate seminars, both in ‘majority world’ scholarly institutions and in Euro-American institutions seeking to broaden their horizons. It reminds us that to read Scripture faithfully today is to read it plurally, from many places, and to listen attentively to voices other than our own. For those committed to that task, this volume is a gift.



BOOK NOTE REVIEW

**Krebs, Verena. *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft and Diplomacy with Latin Europe*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Pp. xvii + 308. € 99.99 (hardback), € 99.99 (paperback), € 85.59 (ebook).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64934-0>**

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Most of my medieval studies in church history have never alluded to any form of Christian spirituality that was going on in Africa in the medieval period. The main emphasis of those studies was on the history of the church in the Latin West. Therefore, most of the theological students in Africa, including myself, grow in their theological studies with the impoverished view of what is transpiring in the African community on the relationship between the Latin West and Africa at large and let alone Ethiopia. This book, therefore, written by Verena Krebs, who is a historian and the director of Mediterranean studies at Ruhr University in Germany, introduces the reader to the diplomacy between the Medieval Ethiopian kings and the Latin West in the early fifteenth century. In this book, Krebs examines historical documents and challenges the traditional interpretation which asserts that the Solomonic royals engaged with the Latin West because they were looking for military equipment and support from the West. However, Krebs asserts that the historical sources demonstrate that the Solomonic royals established a relationship with the Latin west to acquire religious materials such books, liturgical objects, craftsmen, and ecclesiastical fabrics. The main question which this book seeks to answer is *Why did generations of nāgāst (Gə‘əz: ‘kings’; singular: nəguś) initiate diplomatic contacts with different princely and ecclesiastical courts in Europe in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries?*

To answer the main research question, the book is structured on a chronological methodology that seeks to examine the diplomacy of the Ethiopian mission in the Latin West. Consequently, the second chapter surveys the diplomatic missions under the leadership of *aše* Dawit II in the fifth century (*aše* is a Gə‘əz “honorific term of address” used before the names of Ethiopian kings and emperors; xi). In this chapter, Krebs provides the historical data which facilitate the genesis of diplomacy between the Ethiopian royals and the Latin west. Krebs is dogmatic in this chapter about her thesis that the Ethiopian

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Solomonic royals were concerned solely with the religious treasures such as ecclesiastical articles, garments, and artisan-craftsmen. She repeats this argument throughout every chapter emphasizing her thesis statement. This depicts some form of religious quest and zeal from the Solomonic royals that is often seen and interpreted as only coming from the Latin West. Krebs interweaves some of the historical narratives that demonstrate this religious quest, such as the attendance of the council of Constance by some of the Ethiopian delegates in 1416–1418 and visitation to Jerusalem. The chapter attempts to answer the question of what was the quest for linking with the Latin West? Furthermore, Krebs postulates that some of the diplomacy was motivated by the longing to experience some of the sacred sites. This led to building some of the beautiful churches in the Solomonic royal places in Ethiopia. The third chapter refocuses on the sons of Dawit, especially *aše* Yesḥaq and *aše* Zär‘a Ya‘əqob, focusing on the second phase of diplomacy. Many scholars such as Taddese Tamrat and Charles Buckingham have interpreted this phase of diplomacy as motivated by military relations. However, this is the main issue that Krebs tries to debunk in this chapter and in the whole book. Krebs argues that the European crusades that were common in this phase did not derail the Ethiopian interest in religious issues and sacred sites. *Aše* Dawit’s sons followed the footsteps of their father by trying to strengthen this relationship, which was solely built upon religious quest and building of religious sites in Ethiopia.

During the last half of the fifteenth century till the sixteenth century, Ethiopia reached its climax of economic prosperity and cultural enrichment (122). Chapter 4 is grounded in this period, exploring key three Ethiopian embassies with the Latin West. Krebs argues that the prosperity of the late fifteenth century did not derail the Ethiopian royals from their religious quest and the building of churches and religious sites. Furthermore, this chapter also shows the interrelationship between European powerhouses and Ethiopian Solomonic royals. Portugal, to be specific, was eager to build a lasting relationship with the churches in the Horn of Africa that were led by the Solomonic royals. In chapter 5, Krebs surveys recent scholarship on the relation between the Ethiopian royals and the Latin West, which, according to Krebs, fails to interpret the historical documents well because they were motivated by a Eurocentric approach and rooted in the colonial history.

The question that this reader asks after reading this book is: *What other historical issues about Africa are rooted in the colonial history?* This narrative, written by Krebs on the diplomacy between the Ethiopian Solomonic royals and the Latin West, is one of the many that the colonial lens has been and still is used to interpret these documents. Krebs strongly rejects colonial narratives and asserts that it was Latin West that was seeking military support from the Solomonic royals in Ethiopia. This book therefore has a liberation motif which seeks to unravel the historical truth from the colonial historical documents.



BOOK NOTE REVIEW

Fiedler, Klaus, and Kenneth R. Ross, eds. *Christianity in Malawi: A Reader*. Mzuzu, Malawi: Mzuni Press, 2021. Pp. 596. £50.00 (paperback).

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In 2020, the editors released *A Malawi Church History 1860–2020*. To explore Malawi's church history more deeply, two companion volumes were published the following year: *Christianity in Malawi: A Source Book*, edited by Kenneth R. Ross, and the present volume, *Christianity in Malawi: A Reader*. While the Source Book offers a collection of primary texts, this Reader presents a broader range of secondary sources.

This book is a treasure trove for anyone passionate about church history. It features contributions from a variety of authors on diverse topics related to Christianity in Malawi over the past two centuries. To name just a few: **Andrew C. Ross** writes about the quarrel between the Blantyre Mission of the Church of Scotland and the British Central Africa Administration. **Beverly Lacayo** discusses sisterhoods and the empowerment of women in Central and East Africa. **Wiseman C. Chirwa** delves into the religious and political activities of Msokwa Elliot Kamwana Chirwa in Nkhata Bay. **Silas S. Ncozana** highlights the influential role of the women's guild — known as *Mvano* — in spreading the gospel. **L. A. H. Msukwa's** chapter on the role of churches in Malawi's development is also particularly insightful. In addition, the book includes chapters on the involvement of Afrikaners (specifically the Dutch Reformed Church) in the Malawian church, as well as several contributions focused on Seventh Day Baptists.

Rather than summarizing all 19 chapters, I will highlight what I consider the true gem of this volume: **Roderic J. Macdonald's** chapter on Reverend Hanock Msokera Phiri and the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Nyasaland. This chapter skillfully interweaves themes of African independence, Afro-American missionary work, and political

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connections to Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's first president. Hanock Msokera Phiri, Banda's nephew, was born in Kasungu — now in Malawi's central region — and, like Banda, pursued further education and work in South Africa. It was in Boksburg, Transvaal (now Gauteng), that Phiri encountered the AME Church. After being ordained by American Bishop Vernon, he returned to Malawi as an evangelist to plant AME churches and build schools. Phiri was not a lone actor. He served as a bridge-builder, working in cooperation with the Dutch Reformed Church Mission, the Universities' Mission to Central Africa, the Roman Catholic White Fathers Mission, and the Livingstonia Mission of the United Free Church of Scotland. His ecumenical collaborations created pathways for many of his students to pursue studies abroad. One of them, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, went on to study medicine at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. Unfortunately, the AME Church in South Africa later lost interest in the Nyasaland initiative, hindering the long-term establishment of a strong AME presence in Malawi.

This book opens many windows into the country's rich ecclesiastical history. However, it primarily presents a Protestant perspective. Pentecostal churches are not discussed at all, and there is no attention given to children's ministry, such as Sunday school education.

The compilation itself seems somewhat rushed. While each article includes an introduction, some of the introductions include more background information from the respective author. Other chapters lack that information (it is, for example, unclear who Roderic J. Macdonald is). The physical production of the book is also disappointing. The cover of my copy is glued on crookedly, many pages are unevenly cut, and after just one read, the binding begins to fall apart. For a book priced nearly US\$60 at Amazon and £50 at African Book Collective (though those who can purchase the book locally in Malawi are afforded a more reasonable price), the production quality is poor.

In summary, *Christianity in Malawi: A Reader* includes several outstanding contributions. However, the overall presentation leaves much to be desired, suggesting the book may have been brought to market prematurely. Nonetheless, Fiedler and Ross have compiled a work that, for historians and church history enthusiasts, richly recounts the great works of God in the Warm Heart of Africa.



BOOK NOTE REVIEW

Katongole, Emmanuel. *Who Are My People: Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa. Contending Modernities.* Notre Dame, Indiana, USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022, 2023. Pp. xii + 222. US\$35.00 (paperback), US\$100.00 (hardcover), US\$2.99 (ebook).

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Summary

Who Are My People? explores Christian and modern African identities, drawing on scholarly resources and stories to explore if and how Christianity brings transformation in the context of violence in Africa. Katongole contends that modern Africa has “a crisis of belonging” (3, 135, 136, 142, 177), which he traces through three identity markers: ethnicity, religion, and land. The author avers that Africa is undoubtedly modern; the problem is that it possesses a form of modernity rooted in violence, corruption, and chaos. In this crisis, Christianity needs stories and images that reveal the Christian identity as not static but rather a journey which fosters new forms of community. Indeed, the stories Katongole shares demonstrate that embracing the story of God’s suffering love in Christ produces powerful transformation and new communal identities. This love has the ability to see and work towards different ways of living, ways which Katongole describes as the “invention of love” which is “the antidote to Africa’s violent modernity” (4).

Katongole explores the role of imagination and story, exploring how Africa was defined and envisioned by the West in incredibly detrimental ways, and how this story has been ingrained in the thinking of many Africans. Within African theology, Katongole diagnoses a common error of viewing Christian identity as static, and therefore failing to understand its pilgrim nature, which points to the goal of a new self and a new community. Katongole rejects both the narrow, detached ‘spiritual identity’ and the ‘natural identity’ routes, claiming they fall short: they fail to see the subversive nature of the Christian identity and its embodiment in the church community. The author emphasizes Christian identity as ‘in-between,’ or in process, changing and growing as the Christian continues to be conformed to the image of Christ. The call to follow

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invites a person into a new community, the church. Katongole draws from Andrew Walls's 'pilgrim principle'¹ to highlight the uniqueness of God's people.

In Part 2, Katongole explores ethnic, religious, and ecological violence. The author rejects the idea that ethnic identities are foundational and unalterable. Therefore, he shares stories of those who have resisted viewing ethnicity as the most important aspect of their identity, demonstrating that the 'new family' in Christ offers the ability to resist tribalism. Regarding religious violence, he shows the Central African Republic is mired in despair and insecurity, and the language of religious violence is a cover for these deeper issues. Relief efforts within the country simply try to manage the despair, without envisioning how a different future could exist for the country. Katongole's view on the ecological crisis is that it destroys the land as well as people's dignity. It reflects a consumeristic view of one's environment, rather than the reality of interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Loss of one's homeland also leads to a further sense of insecurity and loss of identity. What is needed is a modernity that recognizes and respects the interconnectedness of persons and environment. It is the logic of self-sacrificing love, seen at the cross and embodied by followers of Christ, which can and does re-write stories of despair and re-form hopeless lives. Love is able to envision and create other possibilities, ones that offer transformed ways of living.

Evaluation

Katongole's latest offering foregrounds the role of story and imagination in Christians bringing transformation. Indeed, his own story gives 'flesh' to the academic aspect of his work, and the interviews he shares demonstrate that his work is both grounded in reality and also offering realistic hope of how Africa and African identities can be transformed. Katongole's multiple identities perhaps help him to see more clearly the truth that a person's identity changes with time — what Katongole desires is that Christians will realize the pilgrim nature of their identity and embrace the reconciliation which God would like to bring in and through their lives. He argues powerfully that

¹ Ref. Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," *Faith and Thought* 108, nos. 1 and 2 (1981): 39–52.

Editors' note: Walls's article was reprinted in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7, no. 2 (October 1983): 22–32. It was also republished, slightly revised, in *Missionalia* 10, no. 3 (1982): 93–105; and as chapter 1 in Walls's *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith*, 3–15 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996); and as chapter 1 in *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization* 3, edited by James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, 17–28, *Faith and Culture* (Orbis Books, 1999); and as "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture: Is There a 'Historic Christian Faith'?", chapter 9 in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, edited by Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, 133–138, *American Society of Missiology Series 43* (Orbis Books, 2009).

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God longs to expand a person's sense of 'who are my people?', so that it will include more and more people. The book makes the case, through both argument and personal examples from Katongole and those he interviewed, that a static view of identity is limiting and harmful, as well as fails to do justice to calling of Jesus to follow him.

However, Katongole at times appears to misrepresent his fellow African theologians. For him, they have chosen two different paths upon which to base identity: so-called 'spiritual' (detached from the material, concrete aspects of life) identities and 'natural' (ethnic) identities. In order to reject ethnocentrism, he goes to the other side of the spectrum and at times seems to imply Christians can leave the cultures in which they have been raised, to create a new 'Christian' culture. He also characterizes 'spiritual' identity as unconcerned with the material, concrete aspects of life. The characterization of these two paths of African theology will be an area where some will disagree with Katongole, and represent the weak point of this particular book. For instance, rooting one's identity in Christ in no way requires a detached response to other areas of life, including what he terms the material (historical, environmental, and political). Nor do the theologians he refers to advocate or practice either the detachment or the ethnocentrism which Katongole rightly rejects. This is an unfortunate short-coming in an otherwise strong work.

Aside from this, the work is well-balanced and rich, exploring many ways in which identity can be affected and re-shaped. *Who Are My People?* offers key reminders to Christians: embracing the love of God shown at the cross produces radical transformation, and stories have the power to shape what we believe is possible. Tying together various issues facing Africans with both intellectual work as well as personal testimonies is what makes this book impactful. It also offers a reminder that Christian identities are always at issue, as Christians seek to be salt and light in changing contexts.

This book would be useful for advanced undergraduates or graduate students who are ready to explore the complexities of Christian witness and identity in the African context particularly. It could also be used in courses on community development, politics, or environmental issues, specifically to demonstrate the integration of the Christian faith with those topics. Time spent reading Katongole is never wasted, as he continues to think carefully and deeply about the future of the African continent and envision concrete ways that her future can be bright.



BOOK NOTE REVIEW

Aidoo, Mark S. *Shame in the Individual Lament Psalms and African Spirituality*. African Theological Studies / Études Théologiques Africaines 12. New York: Peter Lang, 2017. Pp. 261. US\$ 80.15 (hardcover), US\$ 75.85 (ebook).

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Mark S. Aidoo's *Shame in the Individual Lament Psalms and African Spirituality* offers a substantial exploration of the Hebrew concept of *bôš* (בוש, 'shame') within twelve Individual Lament Psalms (ILPs) and places these exegetical findings into dialogue with African Christian spirituality. This work, a revision of Aidoo's doctoral dissertation, demonstrates how rhetorical analysis can illuminate the theological and spiritual functions of shame, revealing both its destructive and constructive potential. Although published in 2017 — ordinarily outside the customary range for book reviews — the book's uniqueness and enduring value make it especially worthy of review.

The study begins with a survey of *shame* in the Hebrew Bible, anthropology, and psychology. Aidoo resists the overly simplistic "shame versus guilt" binary that has long dominated anthropological discourse, arguing instead that shame in the Hebrew Bible, and particularly the Book of Psalms, is multifaceted and contextually deployed. Drawing from various scholarly studies, Aidoo distinguishes *positive shame* (discretion, repentance, transformation, self-knowledge) from *negative shame* (despair, worthlessness, destruction). Such categories provide the interpretive scaffolding for his close readings of the psalms.

The heart of the book lies in a detailed rhetorical analysis of twelve ILPs. It is a fact that in the Hebrew Bible, shame vocabulary is most prevalent in the book of Psalms. Aidoo examines these twelve ILPs, which use shame terminology: Psalms 6, 22, 25, 31, 35, 40, 53, 69, 70, 71, 86, and 109. Aidoo carefully engages these ILPs, their literary structures, situations, and strategies, showing how petitions for enemies to be "put to shame" function rhetorically as positive appeals — intended to evoke remorse and eventual transformation — while pleas for the righteous to be spared shame reflect a longing for wholeness and a restored relationship with YHWH.

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Aidoo's theological claims extend beyond exegesis. He contends that shame in the Psalms operates within a spirituality of relatedness, deeply resonant with African spirituality. African worldviews emphasize interconnect-edness, reciprocity, and communal wholeness; thus, the psalmist's petitions against shame can be read not merely as self-defense but as appeals for restored balance in the community and renewed fidelity before God. This contextual bridge is one of the book's strongest contributions, demonstrating how Old Testament spirituality and African Christian experience mutually illumine each other. He reminds readers that in the Hebrew Bible, guilt, though perhaps important for Western readers and in Western theology, is not a materially important part of the emotional matrix for the human person like that of shame.

Methodologically, the work is noteworthy for its interdisciplinary reach. Aidoo employs rhetorical criticism as his primary tool but supplements it with insights from anthropology, psychology, and theology. His analysis of shame alongside "Disappointment Theory" is particularly fresh, showing how unmet expectations in the psalms function rhetorically to reassert trust in God. Specifically, when enemies are "put to shame," they are not merely dishonored but forced into an experience of disappointment — their plots against the psalmist fail, their expectations collapse, and their humiliation exposes them before YHWH.

Theologically, the book underscores the necessity of addressing shame in contemporary Christian formation, pastoral care, and liturgy. Yet, as Aidoo argues, this is particularly true in the African ecclesial contexts, where the vocabulary for articulating shame before God is often underdeveloped. Since this is so, contemporary leaders and those who use the Bible would do well to pay heed to Aidoo's claims that the shame experience is central to spirituality in the ILPs and that these ILPs urge the church to "reexamine its liturgies to meet those who suffer negative emotional shame" (12). Importantly, Aidoo challenges the African church to cultivate a biblical spirituality more attuned to shame, addressing phenomena such as curses, communal rejection, and restoration, while also cautioning against "undisciplined prescriptions of shame" (220). He argues that churches in Africa must work toward developing a "hermeneutic of shame" to connect deeply with the linguistic and cultural realities of various contexts.

Some limitations are apparent. The sheer breadth of secondary literature occasionally makes the argument dense, and the rhetorical and exegetical detail may at times overwhelm readers less versed in Hebrew poetry. The book would also benefit from a more sustained engagement with recent honor-shame scholarship in biblical studies and missiology. Additionally, there is no index of authors and terms, which would have been helpful. Still, these are minor quibbles in an otherwise impressive and rigorous study.

Christopher L. Flanders

**BOOK REVIEW: *Shame in the Individual Lament Psalms and African Spirituality*,
by Mark S. Aidoo**

In sum, Aidoo has produced a pioneering contribution to both Psalm studies and African theology. His work enriches literature on biblical spirituality by demonstrating that shame, far from being merely negative, can serve as a transformative resource for renewal, repentance, and relatedness. For missiologists, the volume underscores the importance of addressing shame in global Christian witness and pastoral praxis. For African leaders, this book can serve as a valuable resource for working toward a more authentic African Christian spirituality. This reviewer hopes that excellent works like Aidoo's will spur on a new generation of African biblical and theological engagement with the critical issues of *shame*, *honor*, and *face*.