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Decolonising theological education in the eyes of African Theologians: Lessons for the church

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Sub-Saharan African countries including Zimbabwe taught and continue to teach students in ministerial formation Western theology using pedagogy that is not contextual to address African concerns. The quality of education and the methods used do not prepare students to encounter the challenges of the dynamic global, social, economic and technological environmental advancement. The definition of theology as the study of God needs to be rethought because theology is not only the study of God. Instead, it involves the study of how God interacts with His creation. This expanded definition has allowed some theologians the likes of Canaan Banana and others to scratch where Africa itches in the bid to meet the goals of *Agenda 2063* of the Africa we want. Using desk research, this article seeks to explore decolonisation in theological education in the spectacles of some African theologians in order to draw lessons for the church in Zimbabwe. Through their insights that deal with aspirations and passion of the African continent, the article concludes by suggesting African teaching methods that are contemporary to the needs of Africans for sustainable development as a way to decolonise theology.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: A call to decolonise theological education in the spectacles of African theological giants brings insights for the church to be relevant in Africa, in line with achieving Agenda 2030 and 2063 goals. This subject matter is informed from the discipline of theology, political theology, political science, education as well as sociology.

Keywords: African; church; citizenry; decolonising; education; theological.

Introduction

The contextualisation of Christianity is a process that calls for the exegesis of Christian truth in terms of and applying it to the real-life issues arising from the socio-cultural context within which the interpreters live (Imasogie 1983:7). This simply means taking seriously every day human life and God's desire to be involved in this life where people live. Biblically, God was involved in the life of the Hebrews throughout the Old Testament. God demonstrated His commitment and willingness to contextualise in the lives of His people for meaning and relevance to them. Even, Jesus's involvement with the people of his day and his willingness to deal with their concerns and questions, teaching using metaphors and parables that were familiar to the day today business of his people, shows high level of contextualisation. Paul and the other New Testament writers, likewise contextualised God's message to suit the people they were addressing. The fact that the writers of Scriptures, are contextualising for different audiences explains the surface level and differences between the messages the writers were teaching their congregants to meet their needs in their different contexts. It is also observed in the Scriptures that the problem caused by Judaizers who misunderstood the Gospel only applied to their cultural context, hence they went on to assume that the Gospel also endorsed their culture. Therefore, these Hebrew Christians believed that because God was willing to enter their way of life he was as such endorsing that way as the only valid cultural expression. These Judaizers concluded that circumcision and other Hebrew religious rituals were the only response of all other nationalities to the Christian message.

The history of Christianity has seen tendencies of reverting to the Judaizers' approach in the missionary movement. The Western Christianity in its endeavour to spread the Gospel through missionary activities, transported the Western gospel suited for the Global North and transplanted

Note: Special Collection: Decolonialism in Theology today.

it in Africa without taking the African world view and self-understanding into consideration in their theological formulations. It therefore means the group in power gets to define orthodoxy and to impose it on less powerful groups unless and until the latter develop enough strength to separate from the dominating group. Given the cultural differences between missionaries and the Africans, among whom missionaries worked, what was then spread or taught to Africans did not scratch them (Africans) where it itches. Today African church leaders are asking questions such as, 'if Christianity is universally valid, does it have answers to the questions non-Westerners are asking? Cannot the Bible be properly interpreted outside the academic corridors of Eurocentrism'.

Through the spectacles of some African theologians such as Canaan Banana and Maponga, this article seeks to explore decolonisation in theological education to remove the Euromerican syndrome that always thinks theology is absolute to a contextualisation of theology that addresses needs of Africans and situate theology in an African world view in order to draw lessons for the church in Zimbabwe. Through their insights that deal with aspirations and passion of the African continent, the article concludes by suggesting African teaching methods that are contemporary to the needs of Africans for sustainable development as a way to decolonise theology.

Methodology

A desk research methodology was used to gather already existing data from published sources in books, articles and journals as well as online data that are relevant to the topic under investigation. Creswell (2009:10) attested that when using a desk study, one will be gathering data without directly engaged in fieldwork. Furthermore, desk research can be defined as (Hakim 1982):

> A tributary examination of a prevailing information that presents clarifications, suppositions or evidence supplementary to, or diverse from, those obtainable from the first account on the entire enquiry and its key outcome. (p. 1)

In the context of this study, the term desk research is used in a broader sense to include every data collected without direct participation in the fieldwork. Furthermore, this research uses this method to gather information from published books both hard copies and electronic books, articles and journals by some African theologians who wrote on issues of decolonisation and contextualisation of theological education. Using already existing data is an alternative possibility for researchers who could not have enough resources and time to carryout interviews in the field. According to some scholars such as Andrews et al. (2012) and Smith (2011):

> Desk study investigation is a practical method that employs similar essential research ideology as studies using primary data and has rules to be followed just as any research method. Even though secondary data enquiry is further defined as a logical research method, nevertheless, not many frameworks are obtainable to direct researchers as they carry out desk research data analysis. (p. 13; p. 920)

The advantage of using already assembled data is that it saves financial resources in transport and other logistics involved in the collection of data. It also affords equal opportunity to all researchers counting or embracing the apprentices and shapes aptitude for empirical research. Furthermore, it is quicker to conduct desk research as one skips other time-consuming research steps.

Biblical perspective on theological education

The importance of education dates back to biblical times that has undergone transformation to suit various contexts. From the Patriarchs, education started with giving instructions to the Israelite parents to teach their children, what God taught them as instructed in Deuteronomy 11:18–19. It is also in the book of Proverbs where references to education and learning methods are enshrined as guide to humanity, (Pr 22:6, 8:10–11, 17–21). It is in the book of Proverbs where human beings were urged to value education more highly than wealth as stated in the above verses. Those who would value education will have sound judgement that leads to prosperity, honour, and a rich inheritance.

Apart from the Old Testament view, theological education should get insights from Jesus' model of teaching. Jesus is considered to be the greatest teacher ever known as evidenced by the impact he had during his life time on earth (Mumuni 2018:345; see also Ango & Rutoro 2020:152). Ango (2018:108) admitted that theological educators need to engage with learners in dialogue, reflection, critical thinking, and action which are the methodologies that Jesus used in the story of Nicodemus who was an intellectual, even with his disciples who were regarded as ignorant, and also with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus answered their questions through asking searching questions as well as engaging them into critical dialogue that resulted into praxis.

In his method of teaching, Jesus answered his audience's questions by throwing back a question to the one who asked, for the one to reflect and provide self with an answer. He was unlike some teachers who respond to questions directly or even felt being challenged by the learners. In the Bible (Lk 10:25–28), Jesus answered an expert of the law's question using this method of questioning:

> 'Teacher,' he asked 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'
>
> 'What is written in the law?' Jesus replied. 'How do you read it?'
>
> He answered, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'
>
> 'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'

From the conversation held the learner seem to have not been convinced with Jesus' answer which, just confirmed what he

already knew hence, he asked a follow up question. 'And who is my neighbour?' (Lk 10:29). Jesus did not give a direct answer. Rather he told a parable of the good Samaritan. From the parable, he asked his learner a question that provoked him to think. 'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' (Lk 10:36).

From the above one can deduce that Jesus was using the questioning technique to search for answers from those around him by provoking them to think for themselves instead of being spoon fed. For Mburu (2019:72), hermeneutics requires the use of certain methods or techniques in order to produce reliable results. Therefore, African interpreters of the Bible particularly theological college lecturers, must be alert to the need of giving a theological translation that connects with where African people are in their cultures. As the church is an interface of contact between the Christian faith and the culture, therefore contextualisation is essential if the biblical message is to be understood for what it is.

The call for new critical perspectives

The speedy social, political and economic vagaries that have forced systems of the Zimbabwean society to change have dire consequences for theological education in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular. The implications are in both ways. On the one hand, the interconnectedness between theological education and society is inseparable. On the other hand, there are social dynamics that affect our theological education systems, at the same time it is a fact that our theological education systems do affect our society. Theological education shapes student ministers who in turn shape the world beyond the ministerial formation classrooms (eds. Carpenter, Glanzer & Lantinga 2014:23; see Ango & Rutoro 2020:146; Babalola 2006:4). If theological education in Africa, Zimbabwe in particular, is to attain transformation that is needed to reach the goals of both *Agenda 2030* and *Agenda 2063*, there is need to decolonise theological education and contextualise it to focus on building character and having ability to solve problems. It should be looked at from the spectacles of insiders who are African theologians themselves to diagnose the relevance of an imported theology from the Global North.

It has been long overdue when Africa and some other developing countries such as Brazil have relied on what Paul Freire called 'banking system of education' where students' minds are regarded as empty vessels, where there is need for teachers to pour in knowledge (Freire 1967:126). Students in this case are considered passive recipients of other people's ideas without having ability to think on their own. This is what prevail in most of the theological colleges dotted around the country, hence the need to turn the tables and advocate for problem solving systems of education where learners are actively involved in critical thinking to look for solutions to their problems. The teacher becomes a facilitator rather than a bank of knowledge.

Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 Agenda (2015), ensures an inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. When articulating this goal, it is critical to observe that education is no longer an impartation of data, certain ideologies or skills, instead, theological education also affect a student's attitude, emotion and social and psychological stance, and model one's world view. Theological education is influential in shaping character and training in conduct that directs humanity to a successful life. Ango and Rutoro (2020) suggest that:

> Successful lives are even more likely if learning involves more than just doing what the lecturer says and involves the students in thinking for themselves and discovering how to come up with innovative ways to solve problems. (p. 147)

In Zimbabwe, the shift from education 3.0 (an education system that focussed on teaching, research and community engagement) to education 5.0, which add two more components that include technology and industrialisation, means that the education in all educational institutions including theological education should now focus on innovation through use of technology and any education should contribute to the industry to create jobs as additional components to the already known teaching, research and community engagement. The call is for students to be able to be job creators instead of being job seekers. Karakoc (2016) puts it:

> The primary focus of any theological education system should be to nurture thinking skills in order to help individuals realize their full potential. Those students who develop these skills will be able to adopt an analytical and evaluative attitude towards their own performance and the performance of the society around them. (p. 82; cf. Almeida & Franco 2011:178)

It is therefore, important for lecturers to develop and engage in analytical, evaluative delivery methods that enable and encourage students' critical thinking skills including teasing their problem-solving skills, research skills, creative skills, and innovative questioning and reasoning skills. There is need to give learners a theological education that is carefully designed and executed in ways that addresses the economic and social objectives of Africa and promotes the common good, which is the key principle of public theology. Because of the centrality of faith in Africa, a faith-based theological education should guide the development of an African theological education guided by African theologians such as Banana who had a decolonising ideology to situate an African context. For Zvobgo (1996:16), such an education system will value not only sustainable development and the development of critical thinking but will also nurture honesty, integrity and god-fearing spirit. All these facets are critical if we are to protect God's creation for present and future generation and achieve the goals of *Agenda 2063*.

African indigenous teaching methods

Theological education systems in Africa, Zimbabwe in particular, should be soaked in indigenous ways of teaching.

It is true that Africa had its own educational tradition that was not bookish but an education system that emanated from identifying problems and finding ways to solve such problems (cf. Seroto 2011). It was not an education that started from learning to look for employment. Rather, students could start by going into the community see the problems engrossed within the community and then find ways to address those challenges. Lecturers in theological education need to think creatively about how they can tap from cultural traditions such as initiation ceremonies, passage of rites, which do have educational models that could be useful to modern day education.

Banana's contextualisation model

In the People's creed, Banana managed to bring out the idea of the universality of God's redemption in a poetic way that paves a true nature of God palatable to the religious cowards and to people who are always bombarded by theological jargons, which are far-fetched from their understanding. In his book the Gospel according to the Ghetto (1980), Banana revealed how God continue to work with his redemptive work within and through the Zimbabwean people regardless of colour, race or creed. He demonstrated that there is enough substance within Zimbabwean culture and custom that would have moved Jesus to say of Zimbabwean spirituality as he said of the Jewish one 'I have not come to destroy but to fulfil' (Banana 1980:ix).

The book clearly demonstrates that Zimbabwean Christianity must recognise and take account of its people's cultural values and social order. Christianity permeates the subject and transforms the same into a new creation. It does not save by crushing the subject and pretending it has become a new creation by setting some foreign object over the supposed unworthy seed of Zimbabwe (Mazobere 1980:x). Banana shows how the people involved must play an active role in their own emancipation. He proved that people are indeed participatory masters of their destiny. Mazobere (1980:x) said as agriculture has proved over the years that one does not improve one's rapoko by imposing maize characteristics on it. You sow, water, manure and fertilise the rapoko seed in its own right to be a better crop in itself. For Banana, the blood of the Westerners or Easterners or civilised ones only did not become the seed of the church but the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church. In his contextual theology, it is the blood of the freedom fighters of Zimbabwe that became the seed of the freedom of all within our beloved God given country (Banana 1980:5).

In decolonising theology, Banana demonstrates how within Zimbabwean spiritual history were facets that commensurate with recognised Jewish religious history. For example, Chaminuka's prophesy, that foreign scholars dismiss because it falls within what they termed a primitive and uncultured grounding while others say it lacks credibility because it was not recorded in any book. For Banana and others, they felt that these foreigners forgot that all those events recorded in the Holy Bible were first of all circulated orally, hence it calls for a revisit to all African stories, legends that are relevant to Africans to be considered and used as tangible and credible illustrations in African Christianity and theological discourse for relevance to African spirituality (Banana 1980:6).

On the other hand, in traditional Zimbabwean cultural concept anyone within proximity of the meal, even a passer-by who arrives at the tail-end of the meal is invited to partake whatever is still available, because it is for all. This is in tandem with what Jesus referred to in the story of the labourers who were engaged to work at different times and were paid the same denarius because of the uniform need. As such Banana emphasised that there has to be a solid nationhood of the one nation in Jesus Christ. Banana further reflected on Zimbabwean traditional religion as an enrichment to Christianity. For him whereas modern Christianity is a weekly activity, in traditional religion the day begins and ends with God. African traditional religion does not have a timeline but they worship God throughout the day. According to Banana (1980):

> For too long the ghetto masses have had the gospel of pie in the sky forced down their throats. The biblical language tends to be far removed from their situation. They have been given the image of an apologetic God who demands humility to the point of self-pity. (p. xiv)

It is against the aforementioned view that decolonisation of theology is invoked so that God meet humanity in their point of strength rather that in their weakness. The challenge to the church today is to take the vanguard position to contextualise and define the nature of mission putting more emphasis on the affirmation of self-hood and utilise learning methods that are problem solving.

Problem solving

Having looked at Jesus's method of theological teaching through questioning it challenged learners to look for solutions through problem-solving method. It also challenged learners to hunt for their own solutions to their particular problems. Through this method of teaching, the lecturer does ask students to solve their own problems. Instead, the lecturer is compelled to ask relevant and right questions that stimulate critical thinking thereby, provoking learners to slowly learn how to think for themselves, exposing them to identify problems, define problems and design correct interventions to deal with their problems on their own. For Maponga (2023), theological education method should be from problem to solutions and not from learning to employment. His aspiration is to see theological students who start from the community where they identify problems that the community face, after which the student has to come up with a proposal that simply explains what one has seen in the community. The student will then look for a theological institution with a proposal identified in the community and seek solutions for the identified problems. The student will engage into

studying at a theological institution grappling with questions from the community and look for answers through studying. One will come up with a write up packed with solutions to the identified problems and go back to the community to deliver the solutions. Lecturers will only be there as mentors who are experienced to journey with the student who is looking for answers through studying. Education should therefore, meet the needs of the community.

Jesus used problem solving when he taught his disciples and other people who followed him. In the Bible, the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman accused of adultery. Jesus challenged the Pharisees to consider their own practices and prompted them to solve the problem they presented for him to solve. Instead of Jesus answering their question about what should be done to the accused woman, he ordered anyone among the Pharisees who was pure without having sinned cast the first stone to the accused woman (Jn 8:7). Karakoc (2016:84) suggests that by throwing back the situation to the Pharisees, He challenged them to analyse what was actually going on beneath the surface and develop their ability to assess situations independently. Jesus had to throw back the challenge to them to enable them to use their own thinking skills to decide what was the appropriate and right course of action for individuals without being instigated by mob psychology. This is one such method that evokes problem-based learning in theological education. This type of learning can be used in all types of curriculums and is branded by thought-provoking questions that arouse critical thinking. It has advantage in equipping learners with capability to be innovative in dealing with routine challenges in life.

Research-based learning

When problems given to students to solve become more challenging, they are automatically forced to search for answers through research that could be in group or individually centred. This is therefore regarded as research-based learning, which also helps students to develop academic inquisitiveness and tenacity as well as skills in team work (Ango & Rutoro 2020:154). In theological colleges, research-based learning is critical because it taps from the Bible itself particularly when Jesus asked his disciples the question, 'who do people say I am' (Mk 8:27), this was an opinion seeking question that provoked the disciples to reflect on available opinion and sought the truth. This was a research-based survey that encourages critical thinking because, after sharing with Jesus their society's perceptions of him, Jesus asked them to seek their own interpretation. In this regard one might get information from different sources but what is required at the end of the day is one's own contribution, which does not reflect the opinion of others but is an independent input that contributes new knowledge.

Challenging learners to discover their milieu, to recognise difficulties, examine these difficulties, and originate conceivable remedies and executing these remedies promote high level of student participation in the development of learning. This also prepares them to gain skills they will use in their life system for their own good and for the good of future generations and communities. Using this learning approach ensures that learners are not caricatures and inactive recipients of knowledge but, they are actively involved from the beginning to the end of knowledge dissemination.

Analysis and conclusion

In summation and in a bid to decolonise theological education in the spectacles of some African theologians the likes of Canaan Banana and Maponga the anthropologist and African theologian, the article managed to assemble biblical views on theological education back dating to the Patriarchs who took education as a priority that had more value than wealth for one to have sound judgement that led to prosperity and honour. Furthermore, the article looked at Jesus' model of teaching that adds value to his ministry through the use of dialogical and question methods, which activated learners to be critical thinkers and be practical. These methods when employed in theological education today become tools for decolonisation of western education that promoted the banking system of education without taking the learner as the provider or source of valuable information. Africans were considered to have no religion and were groping in the dark as such the light had to come through missionaries who imposed their foreign religion in Africa and forced Africans to disregard their religiosity and identity, hence the need to decolonise theological education.

Furthermore, the article calls for new critical perception that shapes theological learners beyond the classroom to become practical theologians who are relevant and wrestle with day today challenges of the society be it economic, political or even social upheavals. This is only achieved through the use of African indigenous teaching methods, which Banana grappled with in the form of contextualisation and problem-solving method advocated by Maponga to meet the needs of the communities. Last but not least, the research-based learning is seen as a critical model to decolonise theological education at United Theological College (UTC) through searching for answers to the questions that the society grapple with day in day out. Research is the key to unlock hidden jewels permeated in the underground of communities only to be unearthed through the help of the residents or communities themselves. Researchers should be found in communities digging deeper to provide answers to challenges faced by communities today through theological education.

In conclusion, theological colleges in Africa should have the ability to impart life-long skills that empower its citizenry to be generators of wealth for sustainable societies. Learners in theological colleges should no longer rely on others to offer them employment but they should be entrepreneurs, creating employment for others as can be seen from newer Pentecostal movements that are establishing great empires the likes of Makandiwa, Magaya and others. Education obtained from

theological colleges should inculcate moral principles, integrity and respect for human rights that equips them to challenge corruption and abusive characters and build the Africa envisaged in *Agenda 2063*. Furthermore, it is recommended to the UTC and other theological colleges in Zimbabwe to embrace Jesus' model of teaching that add value to his ministry through the use of dialogical and question methods, which activated learners to be critical thinkers and be practical. The Ministry of Education can as well adopt this valuable method for the betterment of the education system in Zimbabwe.

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