

## REFLECTIONS ON THE TASK OF THEOLOGY IN AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This article reflects on the task of theology as an intellectual enterprise in the mode of Western analytical thought, in view of the challenges posed by 'Africa'. It addresses primarily the question in European circles of theology within Africa, what their particular task should be. Five areas of interest are pointed out: the need to develop a sophisticated theology capable of dealing with 'structural' social issues; the inter-religious debate; adequate ethical foundations; re-examination of ecclesiology, and the need for theological social theory.*

It has to be said at the outset what this article is not.

It is not an attempt to survey theology in Africa. Nor does it propose to mark the way for theology in Africa for the next decade. In fact, it does not even presume that the trajectory of theology in Africa as a whole is grasped.

No, this article must be understood against the background of a very particular and growing debate in South Africa on the task of theology in an African context. This is a debate in those theological circles which in the past were almost exclusively preoccupied with things North Atlantic, but have now come to accept the challenge to engage in issues concerning Africa. This awareness, it seems to me, has become particularly strong among Afrikaner theologians. In such circles the first and foremost question is: what will such an engagement put on our agenda?

The purpose of this article then is to respond to this question by delineating what I perceive to be the most important issues we will have to face.

### 1. Developing a sophisticated theology of *shalom*

In African theological writings it is often claimed that the specific contribution Africa has made to the universal understanding of reality is its holistic approach, whereby the all encompassing interrelatedness of humanity and indeed of the

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cosmos is fundamental. It is debatable whether a holistic concept is unique to Africa. Such an holistic outlook is found in other Third World cultures, indeed even in bygone European times.

This however does not diminish the importance of the insistence by African theology on a view of the world which stresses the comprehensive interrelatedness of all of life. If not entirely original, African theology is an important custodian of a value which more and more people are coming to rediscover as fundamental to our human (and cosmic) existence (survival). That value is the structural integration of existence. In emphasizing this, the African holistic view serves as an antidote to the individualism which has been responsible for so much of the paralysis of modern theology. In fact it reveals the incapacity of most of present-day theology to deal with structural aspects of life, thereby rendering Christianity impotent in the face of fundamental economic, political and social questions.

This has of course not always been the case. Medieval theology, for example, used to have a very clear idea about the structure of the universe and beyond. Consequently it also developed a clear concept of the structures of society. Much earlier of course came Augustine's *City of God*. And - just one more example - the Christology of the Greek Fathers is totally unintelligible without the assumption of the overall structural interrelation of all being. Hence the recapitulation theory, which was at once a redemptive theory but also a concept of universal justice. (Athanasius and Irenaeus, leading on to Anselm!)

However, the advent of the Enlightenment brought a swing in the focus of theology away from cosmology and thus away from a structural awareness. Theology became more and more infatuated with the primary issue of the Enlightenment: the individual's need for certainty - cognitively as well as existentially. It was finally left to philosophy, economics, political theory and demagogues to advance theories about the structures of human society and the cosmos - resulting, as we know, in the (mostly) atrocious ideologies of the twentieth century. Theology retracted into an ever diminishing island of the inner being of the individual or religious group to provide the theoretical basis of the individual's or the church's religious experience.

The African insistence on understanding our existence as an integrated whole is therefore a challenge to the 'worldlessness' of modern theology. In particular it is the challenge to rediscover theologically the importance of a sound cosmology which will enable Christianity to once again become a serious partner in the human saga.

In biblical terms a theology which stresses the interrelatedness of being, can probably be best formulated as a theology of *shalom*. Without going into detail one would expect the following from such a theology. It would look at the structures of existence as they are embodied in current modes of governance, production and social community in order to evaluate them in the light of the biblical image of *shalom*. For *shalom* is a structural concept. It is in fact a concept of the world, and in particular a world which is wholesomely integrated, a world in which society is structured in such a way that justice and peace embrace. As a consequence it is also a concept of freedom. For a society which is wholesomely integrated, is a society without oppression. It is a society on the basis of mutual respect which can therefore

sustain diversity. It is a society in which everyone comes into his or her own - where plurality is safeguarded.

A theology of *shalom* puts all the nastiness of Africa four-square on the agenda of the church and theology. If it is not to be an exercise in escapism - and thus no gospel! - it cannot but recognize that the real and present Africa is not integrated - neither at a human nor at a cosmic level. To most people living in Africa it is a hard, harsh and inhospitable place. African life is all but *shalom*.

This is particularly evident at an anthropological level. Underlying the socio-political turmoil in Africa is the clear need for a viable vision on cultural and political integration - which at this stage of human history can only be in the form of plurality. Africa has irrevocably been stirred into one mix by the advent of European colonialism. That history cannot be rolled back. Furthermore, part of the enduring legacy of colonialism is that Africa is now absorbed into the global system. As the cliché has it: the global village has emerged. In order to cope in this multi-dimensional world and with multi-dimensional societies, it is of the utmost urgency to come to a viable understanding of the plurality of humanity.

In this respect Christian theology in Africa has a unique role to play. In developing a sophisticated understanding of all the dimensions of the biblical concept of *shalom*, Christianity could contribute considerably to the coming to terms with human plurality. For there are different concepts of plurality. The *apartheid* system in South Africa for example was a plural system - but of an abhorrent character. But is the tribal system any better? Or one party dictatorships? And so these various concepts of human interrelatedness need to be evaluated as to their moral strength. A theology of *shalom* could provide the means to do so, for a theology of *shalom* is a wholesome concept of plurality.

But if this is going to be a sound contribution it will have to be more than just a dream. Too often in the Third World, theology has produced nothing more than dreams - ideals which turn into slogans without real substance. Theology cannot dream about an integrated world without integrating itself with the world! And that means that it is not sufficient to dream only, but the dream must be fleshed out in terms of the nitty-gritty of real life. That however requires dedicated work, particularly intellectual reflection.

The theology of *shalom* ought therefore first and foremost to serve Africa by presenting it with a vision of a wholesome interrelatedness of humanity. The real problems of disintegration will however not be solved without a clear translation of this vision into the categories of social theory and economics. It must be tangible.

In grappling with the disintegrating forces tearing Africa apart African theology can also serve the world as a whole. For as long as African theology insists on a holistic approach it will be a constant reminder to others that the root cause of our problems is of a structural nature. When theology in Africa explores the full depth and scope of the interrelatedness of being in order to develop it more fully into a conceptual tool, it could thus enrich all of theology. Theology at large certainly needs such a

tool in view of the struggle to establish a new world order - which is what seems to lie ahead in the era which is now dawning in the world.

## **2. The inter-religious debate**

The inter-religious debate is of course not unique to Africa. But it takes on a very special form here. Because of the disdain European colonialism has had for African cultural patterns, a great many African states today are composed of anything but culturally homogeneous groups. What is more, this cultural diversity came about not by the people's own volition or as a consequence of the normal evolution of history. Thus, not being a desired diversity, the cultural diversity in Africa in many cases bears in itself the seed of total destruction.

One of the potentially more explosive aspects in this regard is the confrontation between Christianity and Islam. This is made even more critical by the fact that, as a result of the arbitrary way the colonials have balkanized Africa, Christianity and Islam are close to equal forces in a fair number of countries. The socio-political impact is evident; the need for serious interreligious communication even more.

Apart from the political side of it, this situation has its 'report back' in theological reflection too. There is no way that theology will be able to avoid reflection on the claim that Christianity is unique. Even more so the belief that it is exclusive must of necessity come under scrutiny. But at the very least Christian theology will have to delve deep into its own selfunderstanding to find those strands of its tradition which will allow it to develop a cooperative approach. In Africa there is no room for a theology extending the cultural and philosophical postulates from which the Inquisition had sprung - and which, arguably, had also informed the colonial mind of superiority as well as some missionary drives.

The inter-religious debate is however not confined to the Christian - Islam confrontation. Even more important is the relationship between Christianity and African religion. For traditional Africa is not an atheist continent and nothing can be more unworthy of Christianity to proceed as if Africa was a pit of unadulterated darkness. The questions about inculturation arising from the contact between Christianity and African traditional religion are numerous and promise, from the Western analytical point of view, to present a theological maze to explore.

For, when Christendom swept the 'new world' of the Americas, it effectively brought about an extermination of the cultural and religious values and systems it encountered. Fortunately for Africa (and the East) the colonization of Africa took place much later in an age when the folly of the *conquistadores* had somehow been recognized. Of course African cultural and religious values and systems were not left intact, but it must be conceded that they were not systematically exterminated. In fact over the past fifty years there has been an immense resurgence of such values and systems.

At the same time sub-Saharan Africa has taken to Christianity in an astounding way. John Pobee, for instance, claims that Africa is becoming the centre of gravity of Christianity. The claim may be exaggerated. (For Christianity is also flourishing in

Latin America and in some countries in the East) but it is essentially true. The point then to be made is that only in Africa does Christianity really face the issue of inculturation. In the East it is a minority religion and in the Americas it has overpowered cultural opposition.

If this is true, it means that for the first time in a thousand years (a large section of) Christianity is again faced with the transition from one cultural matrix to another. The first major transition was from the Semitic to the Latin world, and the second from the Mediterranean to the Gallic/Germanic world (which, much later on, extended itself into the Americas). And now Christianity faces a new world of indigenous cultural and religious values - and all the questions of inculturation which long ago busied the minds of Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm and to a lesser extent Calvin. Will Africa produce its wise theologians in the same mould?

### 3. The ethics of life (and death)

One need not elaborate too much on the plight of Africa. The long list of horrors is known. The solutions are few, if any.

What concerns us now is the nature of Africa's problems. Africa finds itself on the brink of devastation. In Africa - more so than in any other region of the globe - life itself hangs in the balance. This is true for almost every indicator of human existence. Ecologically deforestation has progressed beyond repair, politically oppression reigns supreme, economically poverty is pervasive, socially the population explosion is uncontrollable, educationally illiteracy grows, medically AIDS is already taking its toll alongside famine and malnutrition. Whatever the uncertainties of the future, it is certain that Africa will increasingly bury its premature dead. And as this happens a concomitant breakdown in social structures is quite conceivable.

The abstraction and intellectual objectivity with which ethical issues arising from this situation can be contemplated in First World contexts, lose their appeal amid the real squalor and the massive structural deprivation. In fact the plight of the masses forces one to reassess the scope and purpose of ethics itself.

If I am not totally mistaken, the underlying assumption of all of classical (Western) ethics going back to its Greek sources is the search for enjoyment (not to be confused, however, with pleasure). Most certainly the policies and politics of the modern era assume that the miracle of life is given to maximise its potential. Whether life is indeed a mine from which potential is to be extracted is not questioned. Inasmuch as these assumptions are translated into ethics they give rise to a moral code of optimism - which can, and often does, reverse into a deep pessimism. But such a pessimism is premised on the same assumptions as the optimistic code.

They differ in their assessment of the (full) realizability of the potential of life. But they are both perplexed by the 'unnatural' and certainly illogical impeding of such potential by forces of death and immobility. Hence so much of the ethical endeavour

is directed to minimizing death and immobility and in doing so to defending the enjoyment of life.

I am not denigrating such ethical endeavour. By no means. But the point to be made is that such ethics miss the existential needs of Africa. For in Africa (as elsewhere in the Third World) existence itself is being questioned fundamentally. It is not the time nor the place for an ethic of enjoyment. What we need is an ethic of life (and death).

An ethic of life (and death) will take its point of departure in the notion of sustainability. As a consequence it will not promote the idea of maximization but rather of cooperation with the powers of life. Not what can be extracted from life, but complying graciously with life (and death) will be the guiding principle. An ethic of life and death will not follow an ethic of enjoyment in the dichotomy which the latter draws between life and the individual subject. It would rather see the individual as part of the stream of life (and death).

But on the other hand, if it is to remain true to the notion of sustainability, it will not be an ethic of fatalism. What must be sustained cannot do so on its own accord. Life is not automatic. It must be created, and re-created. An ethic of life (and death) is therefore no escapist option. Rather, it is a very direct and honest confrontation with real life (and death) in Africa today.

In this confrontation Africa is facing hard and harsh decisions. Christianity cannot shirk its duty to engage in ethical counsel concerning them. Given the nature and the enormity of the issues, theology in Africa will have to be self-reliant to a large extent. In fact, it will need to reappraise the theological starting point from which its ethical criteria are drawn.

In this respect theology should avoid a serious trap. Theology should not succumb to the temptation to build its ethics on the (unquestionable) support of God for the poor. That the Bible depicts God as being on the side of the poor constitutes an admonishment directed at the rich and the powerful. It is therefore preached to the rich. But it is preached by prophets, not by the poor. For it is not an ethic for the poor. What the poor need is not an ethic about the 'underside of history', but an ethic of life (and death). The purpose of God's support for the poor is never to endorse their position, but to empower them, to revive their dignity and creativity. And no amount of dependency theory (from which nothing but the 'entitlement'-syndrome can be derived) will restore dignity - for dignity is not bestowed; it is born from within.

The theological basis of an ethic of life (and death) is Christology. For in the life of Christ the essence of human and cosmic life (and death) was at stake. No wonder that classical Christology saw the redemptive work of Christ as a cosmological event (physical in the case of the Greek tradition and moral in the Latin). A Christian ethic facing a situation where life itself is endangered must therefore take its point of departure in the full meaning of the redemptive act of Christ's life and death.

#### 4. Rethinking the role of the church in society

The point to be made here is best done by direct reference to trends in the Afrikaner churches. The phenomenon is however by no means restricted to them.

The reigning ecclesiology, particularly in Afrikaner church circles, is premised to a large extent by the fear of secularization and the need to fend off this foe. Part of the fixation was imported from European theology after World War II. But much of it can also be ascribed to the reluctance with which Afrikaner culture regarded the modern lifestyle which came with the process of urbanization. In many respects the Afrikaner churches functioned as the custodian of bygone cultural values and expressed this as opposition to secularization.

Now this fixation on secularization has put the churches very much on the defensive. More and more the question has become one of defining the unique role and position of the church. This is exemplified in the Dutch Reformed Church's latest socio-theological document, published in 1990. In this document the uniqueness of the church is grounded in recreation, not in creation. The church is depicted as an eschatological institution, not a social one. This is of course not to say that the church is a nefarious phenomenon; nor that the church has no social function to fulfil. But it does mean to state the principle that the church's identity is only safeguarded if it is not grounded in its relationship to the (secular) world.

Underlying all of this is a deep-rooted skepticism as to the usefulness of the church (and theology) to the modern world. In a context dominated by the principle of meritocracy, the church as an institution of social value has taken a beating over the past century. The 'world' seems perfectly capable of going its way without the church.

A constructive confrontation with Africa outside South Africa serves to demythologize the above despondent view of the church and its role in the world. First of all one is challenged by the actual role the churches play in the African society. In particular the remarkable service done to Africa through their acting as NGO's cannot go by unnoticed. The fact is that the churches, in this capacity, function as important (and in some cases as only) ligaments of the social body of Africa.

Secondly, and more importantly, this is not done as part of a desperate last attempt to prove the worth of the church and to stave off secularization. Instead, it flows naturally from the integrated understanding of life whereby the secular is no alien territory to the sacred.

After centuries of practice to distinguish between the secular and the sacred, those of us from the Western tradition find it difficult to see things in the integrated way. And we may indeed have good reasons to be hesitant to learn how. This sort of approach can easily lead to a cultural mysticism, to an intellectual sincretism and as Afrikaners can attest - to a consecration of inhuman political systems. Yes, there is merit in the Western distance between the sacred and the secular. For this distance leaves room for critical analyses and, if need be, dissidence.

But having said this, the challenge of African ecclesiology still remains. For it challenges us not to confuse critical distance with worldly disengagement. And this means it challenges us not to take the secularization syndrome as the point of reference of our ecclesiology. Whatever else African ecclesiology may mean, it is an exhibition of the fact that Christianity can operate and can be appreciated outside the narrow province assigned to it under the influence of the dogma of secularization.

Accepting this has profound implications for one's views both on the actual role of the church in the world and on the theological content of one's ecclesiology. But to explicate further is of course not the purpose of this article.

## **5. The need for social theory**

Perhaps the most important function of the confrontation with Africa is that it reveals the most serious weakness of Christian theology in the modern era, namely its lack of proper social theory.

One only has to take into account the almost total gullibility Christian theology has shown all through our century when faced with ideologies, to realize our poverty in this respect. In fact, it is quite possible to classify theologies around the globe according to the prevailing local ideologies - an indication of the fact that theology has up to this day not been able to develop a theological tool with which social theories and systems can be evaluated.

The poverty of social theology is global. But it becomes fully transparent only in Africa<sup>2</sup>. For here in Africa the one-sidedness of the basis of social thought in mainstream theological reflections becomes clear as nowhere else.

The whole edifice of learned theology - at least that with which I am acquainted - is founded on an interpretation of European (read Christian) history which sees the vital turning point affecting our present situation as being the Enlightenment and its antecedent developments.

No doubt the Enlightenment was a major movement of transformation in recent history. And no doubt the consequences are momentous. But the fact is that the Enlightenment was only a part of a much broader transition. In many ways it was only the mirror of the real transformation. And certainly it was an elitist event in that it was an intellectual affair with new ideas about knowledge and rationality.

The transformation of European history which affected society in general and eventually the globe was the result of the scientific and industrial revolutions, not the Enlightenment. These two revolutions changed the physical character of the world and the nature of human society fundamentally and irrevocably. In general terms

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2. This is not to steal the 'limelight' from Latin America, but there are important differences between the two continents, the most important for our present purposes being that Latin America is much more European than non-European - culturally, economically and religiously. This is one of the reasons why Liberation Theology is no more than an appropriation of certain strands of European thought.



one can say that the mode of human existence changed from the speculative to the economic.

But the social theory of Christian theology has not followed this trend. By affixing itself to the Enlightenment - mostly to oppose it - it has affixed itself to a mode of existence which by and large still maintains the speculative mode. Little wonder that Christianity in Europe has never taken root as a workers' religion. Christian theology speaks a language and attempts to solve problems which are foreign to the labour class. It assumes as its audience those educated in ideas. In fact it assumes the educated non-believer as its primary audience - an audience more often than not found more within the ambit of the church or of theology than outside.

This is not the place to discuss the detail of modern Western theology. It must suffice to point out that such subjects as Old Testament and New Testament owe their very existence as independent subjects to theology's struggle with the doubts sown by the Enlightenment. In fact, to a large extent the very methodology which is still often considered standard to these disciplines is a product of the history of hermeneutics set loose by the Enlightenment. Similar remarks can be made about other facets of theology, notably systematic theology and ethics. But a conclusion must be drawn. Mainstream theology is tuned in, one way or another, to the thought matrix of the Enlightenment. And for this reason it has missed out on serious reflection concerning social theory.

The issues the mass of people had and have to deal with are social by nature. Inasmuch as this can be rationally described, it is done by economists, sociologists and the like. This is particularly clear in Africa. To understand the present position of Africa one has to understand the history of colonialism, the present international economic order, and so forth. It is only then that it becomes clear what documents such as the *Kairos* or the *Damascus* documents are about. It is not the quest for understanding and clear knowledge which is fundamental, but for survival. In fact, at least in Africa, the majority by far cannot and do not read. They live to survive. To them, as to most others, the problems raised by Enlightenment arguments are totally irrelevant. And as they constitute the majority of the world's population today, more and more political and social energy, in practice and in theory, is expended on them. Theology, at least serious theoretical theology, is, however, not part of this enterprise.

This is not to denigrate theological attempts to answer to the Enlightenment objections. Certainly it would be irresponsible if theology should ignore the issues raised there. But having been taken into the Enlightenment agenda, theology has become captive to those issues only. This captivity becomes dramatically clear in the confrontation with the material and social problems of Africa, and even more so when it becomes evident that in African culture there does not even exist the conditions to take the Enlightenment induced discourses seriously.

What becomes evident therefore is the need for theology to reappraise the history of Europe over the past few centuries, and to start engaging in serious social theorizing. Relieving theology from its one-sidedness is not only imperative if

anything of consequence is to be delivered to Africa, but it may prove liberative in European circles as well.