

## NARRATIVE, EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRISIS AND RECONSTRUCTION – MY STORY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE WORK OF KWAME BEDIAKO

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### Abstract

*Stories create meaning. When the stories we live by no longer make sense in the light of our experience then we undergo an epistemological crisis. This can lead to a mental breakdown if we do not find, or construct, another story or enlarge our existing story so that we can make sense of our lives in the light of our new experience. I underwent such an epistemological crisis when my existing Pentecostal story could not explain my new experience of how the oppressed people were experiencing life in South Africa. A brief time in the reconciliation ministry convinced me that the third way theology that was being done there did not work. Neither could I find satisfaction in liberation theology. Eventually I came across the theology of Kwame Bediako who introduced me to the notion of worldviews and their impact on how we construct the story of our lives. This has opened up for me new dimensions of theology and philosophy that are Afro-centric rather than Euro-centric, meaning that human beings are central but live in a vulnerable relationship with each other and with God in a spiritual universe.*

**Key Words:** Epistemological crisis, Kwame Bediako, Narratives, Worldviews, Enchantment

We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn hate and love by narrative.<sup>1</sup>

Stories are not simply about how things start and how they end. They are also about constructing meaning. This means that stories have to do with epistemology. If we are not able to tell the stories of our lives coherently, then we are having difficulty finding meaning in our lives which means we are probably undergoing a crisis on a very profound, epistemological level. Alasdair MacIntyre uses two celebrated epistemological crises to try to underline the importance of what it means to be able to tell our stories or, to put it another way, to locate our stories within the wider context of a tradition or meta-narrative. One is the crisis of Hamlet and the other the crisis of Descartes. The phrases “to be or not to be, that is the question” and “I think therefore I am” are amongst the best known phrases in the English language. This is because they have become paradigmatic of an epistemological crisis. They were originally spoken by two people who had made the paralyzing discovery that they can no longer take for granted the reality that they have hitherto been used to, that they are susceptible to rival interpretations of reality, and that unless they are able to formulate and choose a set of schemata by which they can make their thinking and action intelligible, both to themselves and to others, then they are probably on the verge of a mental breakdown. To resolve such a crisis, according to MacIntyre, a recognition needs to

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<sup>1</sup> Hardy B 1975. *Tellers and Listeners The Narrative Imagination*, Athlone Press, p. 4.

take place that their experiences can only make sense if they are seen to be part of a wider narrative.

When an epistemological crisis is resolved, it is by the construction of a new narrative which enables the agent to understand *both* how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs *and* how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them. The narrative in terms of which he or she at first understood and ordered experiences is itself made into the subject of an enlarged narrative. The agent has to come to understand how the criteria of truth and understanding must be reformulated. He has to become epistemologically self-conscious and at a certain point he may have to come to acknowledge two conclusions: The first is that his new forms of understanding may themselves in turn come to be put in question at any time; the second is that, because in such crises the criteria of truth, intelligibility, and rationality may always themselves be put in question – as they are in *Hamlet* – we are never in a position to claim that now we possess the truth or now we are fully rational. The most we can claim is that this is the best account which anyone has been able to give so far, and that our beliefs about what the marks of a “best account so far” are will themselves change in what are at present unpredictable ways.<sup>2</sup>

MacIntyre goes on to argue that epistemological crises are resolved only when the protagonist understands very clearly that a schema of interpretation has broken down irremediably in certain specific ways. He says that Hamlet understood that his doubts were formulated against the backdrop of very specific beliefs but Descartes did not. Instead he doubted everything except for the fact that he was the person who was doing the doubting. MacIntyre rejects this, and the intellectual tradition that it has spawned, on the grounds that “someone who really believed that he knew nothing would not even know how to begin on a course of radical doubt; for he would have no conception of what his task might be, of what it would be to settle his doubts and to acquire well founded beliefs.”<sup>3</sup> What Descartes should have done, according to MacIntyre, was simply recognize, as did Hamlet, that the crisis of the self that he was facing was a crisis of the tradition that formed the self. From there he should have been able to reconstruct the tradition in a way that would have enabled him to make sense of himself and his world once again. Instead he invents “an unhistorical, self-endorsed self consciousness and tries to describe his epistemology in terms of it.”<sup>4</sup> “To doubt all your beliefs here and now without reference to historical or autobiographical context is not meaningless” says MacIntyre, “but it is an invitation not to philosophy but to mental breakdown.”<sup>5</sup>

I have quoted MacIntyre at length here because he brings together epistemological crisis, narrative, tradition, skepticism, and mental breakdown in a way that not only resonates remarkably with my own story, but is deeply instructive of how theology works. Although MacIntyre’s reflections are focused around philosophy and science (he discusses these ideas in the context of the competing schemata mainly of Kuhn and Polanyi), they are profoundly relevant to the practice of theology. Just as MacIntyre asserts that philosophical and scientific ideas take shape within the context of broader meta-narratives, or traditions, so also theological dogma takes shape in the context of meta-narratives or traditions. Beliefs make sense within stories. Without the stories they make no sense. As events precede ideas so stories precede propositions. Just as there is no such thing in science as a

<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre A 1989. “Epistemological Crises, Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science” in *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology*, Hauerwas, S & Jones, G (eds.), Grand Rapids Michigan, pp. 138-157, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p. 147.

fact without a theory so there is no such thing in theology as a belief without a story.<sup>6</sup> This can apply on a personal level – Paul’s beliefs about the sovereignty of God must be seen in the light of the story of his experience on the road to Damascus, Wesley’s beliefs about the experience of the Holy Spirit must be seen in the light of his heart being strangely warmed while in the company of the Pietists, Luther’s beliefs about salvation by grace must be seen in the light of his attempts to experience forgiveness by stringent adherence to his monastic tradition – but it can also apply on the level of traditions or meta-narratives that influence the faith of great numbers of people. The experiences of each of the three people mentioned above took place in the context of a crisis of faith, literally an epistemological crisis, if we are to accept the root meaning of the word *pisteo*, to believe. The crisis they experienced meant that they had to move from one set of beliefs to another set of beliefs because they had experiences that contradicted their previous set of beliefs. New beliefs had to emerge to accommodate the new experiences that they had had. To refuse to move on would be to refuse the burden of history to change. Epistemological crisis, a crisis in the episteme, that happy integration of the experiences and beliefs of a person, occurs when there is a disjuncture between one’s experience and one’s belief. This can be resolved only when one is prepared to change one’s beliefs. When the relationship between belief and experience breaks down to the point that one’s beliefs become meaningless then it is surely the beliefs that must change. One can hardly change one’s experience. One could deny one’s experience, but this would indicate a serious disjuncture between self and reality, in itself a recipe for mental breakdown. Changing one’s beliefs is far easier when one recognizes that they are part of a wider narrative, the boundaries of which are continually expanding. In such a situation to change one’s beliefs is to review the story in which those beliefs have taken shape. On the other hand, a propositional approach to theology, in other words one that ignores the relationship between dogma and story, places an overwhelming burden on the believer because belief, or dogma, in such a system takes on the nature of an absolute, the contradiction of which in itself invites unbearable guilt or unpardonable condemnation. A narrative approach helps explain, in MacIntyre’s terms:

- How one could have held such beliefs in the first place.
- How one could have been so misled by them.
- How the experiences one has had can become part of a larger narrative.
- How the criteria for truth can be reformulated.

As a result of such an exercise one becomes aware, as MacIntyre goes on to explain, that one’s new position might be provisional and must itself be subject to the same process of change in the future.

I have found MacIntyre’s discussion on epistemological crisis especially helpful in the description of my own theological pilgrimage. For fifteen years I was in the ministry in a Pentecostal denomination. Being in a Pentecostal church in the 1970’s and 80’s in this country was rather like being in a submarine, suspended beneath the surface of the world where history was taking place, and sending up the periscope now and again to see what was happening. Events such as the Soweto uprising of 1976 were signs of the imminent return of Christ, and provided further reason to up the tempo of our zeal for the Lord and increase the decibel level of our Sunday worship. Although I had degrees in both the sciences and the arts, I had little training in theology, my arts degree consisting of majors in

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<sup>6</sup> For a fuller treatment of how a narrative theology works and for its relevance in the South African context see Balcomb A, “Narrative – exploring a new way of doing theology in the New South Africa” *JTSA* July 1998 No. 101, pp. 11-22.

English and Church History. The slippery slope began when I began seriously to encounter people on the other side of the apartheid divide. A pivotal experience took place when I was kicked out of a caravan park because I had black friends with me. When I took the experience back to the conveners of the conference that I was attending and suggested that all the white Christian patrons of the caravan park who were attending the same conference as I should join in solidarity and leave the park I was told that I should have known better than to invite blacks to stay with me in a white caravan park. This single experience put me on a journey of enquiry that inevitably led me in a different direction theologically. But I had no other story by which to understand the Christian faith and the crisis that began to loom in my life led me out of the Pentecostal church and into the wilderness for several years. It was a classic case of profound disjuncture between my beliefs and my experience.

As an evangelical I was landed with a legacy of biblical interpretation that allowed very little room for contextual readings of the bible. To concede that the context shapes biblical revelation is, for an evangelical, to begin the slippery slide to apostasy. However, when the existential circumstances of one's life are such that it is glaringly obvious that context shapes revelation then there is little further intellectual persuading that is needed. What was needed in my case, however, was a theological underpinning for this. I had become convinced, as I began to experience South Africa from the underside, that is, from the perspective of the oppressed, that those who were not in this position did not have, and probably could not have, the same understanding of the Christian faith. This is, in itself, a shocking revelation. The only way through it is to recognize that there is more than one way of understanding the truth. This may seem fairly axiomatic to someone who is prepared to concede to any form of contextuality or pluralism but to make this concession is, epistemologically, a huge step to take that might have a profoundly destabilizing influence on one's life. Berger maintains that "The appearance of an alternative symbolic universe poses a threat because its very existence demonstrates empirically that one's own universe is less than inevitable ... This shocking fact must be accounted for theoretically, if nothing more."<sup>7</sup>

The 'shocking fact' of realizing that there were other ways of understanding reality, even the reality of the gospel, was one thing, being able to account for this theoretically, was another. And it was precisely this that I had to do if I was to get through the crisis that I was experiencing. I was desperate to find, in those days, a theology that permitted the belief that there was more than one way of understanding truth. I discovered an article by Klaus Nürnberger that empirically established that factory workers understood things differently from management. This was meaningful to me as I had established a friendship with a shop steward at Sarmcol factory in Howick, where I lived at the time, who was also a Methodist lay preacher and who was also a key figure in the strike. I wrote to Klaus in those early days and asked him for anything else that could help me understand what was going on. I devoured everything that I could lay my hands on written by him. A profound sense of what I can only call 'epistemological relief' began to take over! My understanding of this was considerably increased with another pivotal book in my life – Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Berger P 1971. *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Penguin, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> In this book Mannheim argues that those with power understand things in such a way that reinforces their power, that is ideologically, and those without power understand things in such a way that helps them imagine themselves in a state of freedom. Both of these are deficient in themselves because what the one ignores the other entertains. Mannheim argued that for a full understanding of political reality they needed to be exercised in conjunction with each other, which meant, effectively, that their exponents needed to be brought together.

But theological paradigms, like epistemological paradigms, do not collapse easily. If there is nothing to take place, then their collapse is an invitation, as MacIntyre suggests, to mental breakdown. When the possibility of mental breakdown is accompanied by the fact that you have been kicked out of your church and you no longer have the support of the ecclesial community of which you were a part because this community views you as a heretic, then your state of mind can become suicidal.

From here my theological pilgrimage took on the speed of a formula one race. I felt the need to catch up on years of theological neglect. When I applied to do theology at Natal University I was permitted to enter postgraduate studies on the strength of having more than one undergraduate degree and I soon discovered Jürgen Moltmann. My Master's thesis was on Moltmann's use of the crucifixion motif, mainly in his anthropology.<sup>9</sup> I had finally found a theology that could match my experience.

Moltmann was, of course, inspired by Luther's theology of the cross. In my Master's thesis I argued that the other inspiration for Moltmann was Hegel and I described Moltmann's theology of the cross as a kind of Hegelianized Lutheranism.

The other theologian that was an inspiration to me at this time was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, more specifically his focus away from the ultimate to the penultimate. Such a shift involved an entirely new set of theological, and ethical, priorities, as well as an entirely new way of understanding the faith. What was previously seen as marginal to the faith became central and, problematically, what was previously seen as central, that is God, became marginal.

When one becomes acutely aware of the chasm that exists between communities in the same society the obvious next step in terms of ministry becomes the need for reconciliation. I embarked on this ministry as one possessed. I joined the National Initiative for Reconciliation (NIR) run by African Enterprise and found myself rushing around the country trying to persuade the white church to wake up to the fact that we were facing a revolution and things had to change. More specifically *they* had to change. I soon became aware, however, that reconciliation itself was an idea that was understood completely differently by those on opposite sides of the racial divide. Whereas whites were content to understand it in terms of mixed worship services where we all praised the Lord together as long as we could all disappear to our respective ghettos, blacks understood it as having a universal franchise. I found Nürnberger's writings on reconciliation profoundly helpful. He seemed to be the only theologian in the NIR who was prepared to recognize that ideologies were working on both sides that were influencing our theologies and that power sharing was necessary.

My disillusion with the NIR led me inevitably in the direction of liberation theology. Jim Cochrane was enormously helpful in this transition and he ended up supervising my doctoral thesis critiquing third way theology – the theological basis for the NIR. I had discovered, by this time, that in spite of Nürnberger's highly persuasive theology of reconciliation the white middle class and big business, which was so influential in the thinking of the NIR at the time, had another neo-liberal agenda. Nürnberger's writings helped to show me that ideology, by definition, disabled people from seeing the point of view of the other because self-interest did not permit this. His theory was that it was in the church, where we were forced to accept each other unconditionally, that we could confront each other, find each other, and change. I was persuaded by the idea but it soon became apparent that this simply was not happening on a scale that would have any political impact on the country.

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<sup>9</sup> Balcomb A 1984. "A critical analysis of the use of the crucifixion motif in the theology of Jürgen Moltmann", unpublished Master's thesis, University of Natal.

Inevitably my drift was toward liberation theology. I was not persuaded, however, with the liberation theology that was emerging in South Africa during the 1980's. This because, besides Albert Nolan's *God in South Africa*, there was very little theological substance to this theology and the 'epistemological privilege' of the poor was being rather crassly translated as the epistemological privilege of the mass democratic movement. My further quest for theological satisfaction resulted in my PhD thesis in which I struggled with all of these issues, using the NIR as a case study for a critique of reconciliation.<sup>10</sup>

My search for an alternative to this is summarized in the following quote from my book *Third Way Theology*:

But what if there is a way in which transcendence and uniqueness can take on quite opposite political significance (than that suggested by Third Way Theology, which translated not into commitment to transformation but ambivalence about it)? ...What if there is something other than the triumphalism of a theology of the status quo, the scepticism of some theologies of liberation, and the angst of a theology that cannot decide what it wants to legitimate and therefore legitimates the middle? What if there was a theology that was clear both in its commitment to radical transformation as well as to the uniqueness and identity of the Christian faith? A theology that inspires a holistic, integrist faith, committed to transformationary engagement with the world, and affirmative of the existence of a transcendent God who intervenes on the side of the poor and oppressed both to empower and judge their cause? A theology 'realist' enough to be thoroughly cognizant of the inherent risks of political involvement and 'utopian' enough to believe that if those risks are not taken a new society will not emerge? A theology that believes not only in the subversion of the old but the construction of the new? A theology that recognizes the need for rigorous social analysis but recognizes its primary task as theological reflection?<sup>11</sup>

I subsequently began to turn to other third world theologians and found in the work of M.M. Thomas a more appropriate theology in which to situate my story. This is because he seemed able to do a radical theology of liberation without the sacrifice of the uniqueness of a Christian identity which seemed to be the problem related to liberation theology in the South African context at the time, so closely tied as it was to the political agenda of the mass democratic movement.

Just when we were all digging in for the long haul of the struggle against apartheid De Klerk made his announcement that he was going to release Mandela and unban the ANC. This posed another crisis of an all too different kind – liberation theology was about to become redundant and third way theology was about to be adopted by a new status quo.<sup>12</sup> The political change was accompanied by the emergence of a whole new set of issues and theological priorities many of which, in my opinion, were not recognized. With the inevitable demise of apartheid, issues other than political emancipation began to come to the fore. Foremost amongst these were issues around culture and identity. In an article written in 1998 I characterized the theologies emerging around these issues as theologies of being, and those emerging around sociopolitical issues as theologies of bread.<sup>13</sup> It soon became apparent to me that while we in South Africa were busy with issues of socio-

<sup>10</sup> Balcomb A 1993. *Third Way Theology – Reconciliation, Revolution, and Reform in the South African Church during the 1980's*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.

<sup>11</sup> Balcomb A. *Third Way Theology*, p. 235.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of this crisis see "Negotiating the crisis of success: Contextual Theology ten years into Democracy", *Scriptura* 89, 2005, pp. 482-494.

<sup>13</sup> Balcomb A 1998. "From Liberation to Democracy: Theologies of Bread and Being in the New South Africa", *Missionalia*, Vol 26, No. 1 April 1998, pp. 54-73.

political liberation theologians north of the Limpopo were busy with theologies that were to do with issues of African identity, in the wake of colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

It was around this time that I discovered the theology of Kwame Bediako, the foremost thinker, in my opinion, around the issues of theology, culture, and identity in Africa. His impact on my own thinking has been profound and it is to this that I now wish to turn.

Bediako was born in Accra, Ghana on 7 July 1945. His first degree was in French studies at the University of Legon, Accra. He continued in postgraduate studies in French literature at the University of Bordeaux, France where he did a Master's degree in modern French literature and then a doctoral degree in modern African literature in French. At this time he was a fairly convinced atheist. Something happened, however, to bring him to faith in Christ and he first studied theology at the London Bible College where he obtained a first class honours degree. He then completed a doctor of philosophy degree in divinity at Aberdeen, Scotland, the title of his thesis being "Identity and integration: An enquiry into the nature and problems of theological indigenization in selected early Hellenistic and modern African Christian writers". During this time he developed a relationship with Andrew Walls who mentored him in his studies and who has become a lifelong friend to him and his English born wife Gillian Mary. He entered the ordained ministry in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana in 1978, spent two years teaching in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen and returned to Ghana to become the resident pastor of Ridge Church Accra – an international and interdenominational congregation. In 1987 he became the full time director of Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology in Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana. He has also been a visiting lecturer at universities in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. He has turned down at least one offer of a chair at an Ivy League university in the United States. He is a member of numerous academic committees and has been chairperson of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT), the African Theological Initiative, and the Ghana Evangelical Theological Fellowship. He is also a fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is the author of more than forty journal articles and two major books – *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 1994, Edinburgh University Press, and *Theology and Identity: The impact of culture on Christian thought in the second century and modern Africa*, 1992, Regnum Books. This book was selected as a finalist for the 1993 Harper-Collins Religious Book Award in 1993.

Bediako is, in my opinion, the most erudite of the contemporary African theologians. His intellectual acumen lies not only in the theological field. His studies in African and French literature and philosophy have equipped him on a level of scholarship and depth of understanding of Africa that few on the continent can match. He is also a man of profound faith and commitment, not only to God, but to his African context. He has no desire to pursue his own career theologically although there are constant opportunities for him to do this. His commitment is to the African continent where he spends the vast majority of his time mentoring young African scholars.

Bediako's theology rests on the single-minded conviction that the Christian gospel has a translatable essence that is better understood by those whose worldview corresponds with the worldview of its earliest propagators and thinkers, especially in the Patristic era. The worldview about which he speaks was characterized by H.W. Turner as the 'primal' world-

<sup>14</sup> For further reflection on this difference see Balcomb A. "Faith or suspicion? Theological dialogue North and South of the Limpopo with special reference to the theologies of Kwame Bediako and Andrew Walls" in *JTSA*, March 1998, No 100, pp. 3-19.

view which subsists in six features. First, a sense of kinship with nature, in which animals and plants, no less than human beings, have their own spiritual existence and place in the universe, as interdependent parts of the whole. Second, the deep sense that humankind is finite and weak and in need of a supernatural power. Third, that humankind is not alone in the universe, that there is a spiritual world of powers and beings more ultimate than itself. This is a personalized universe where the appropriate question is not *what* causes things to happen but *who* causes things to happen. Fourth, human beings can enter into relationships with the benevolent spirit world. Fifth, an acute sense of the afterlife usually expressed in belief in and respect for the ancestors who may be referred to as the 'living dead'. Sixth, humans live in a sacramental universe where there is no dichotomy between the physical and spiritual and that the physical can act as a vehicle for the sacred.

On the basis of the primal worldview Bediako posits the following thesis:

When we are able to reformulate the Christian faith drawing on aspects of the primal imagination in the ways indicated ... it seems that we can achieve a unified and organic view of the knowledge of truth, and so avoid the destructive dichotomies in epistemology which, since the European Enlightenment, have gradually drained the vital power out of Christian theology by shunting its affirmations into the siding of mere opinion... Perhaps it may be necessary to recognize afresh that, after all, the real encounter with alternative viewpoints and interpretations of reality takes place not in words alone, but in the realm of the spirit and in the things of the spirit.<sup>15</sup>

In this single statement Bediako more or less sums up his theological project.

Before establishing what Bediako is interested in it would be worth establishing what he is clearly not interested in. He hints at this in his reference to "destructive dichotomies in epistemology ... since the European Enlightenment ... (that) have drained the vital power out of Christianity". This is the only reference, tangential as it is, that I have found in all of Bediako's writings to non-African theology, other than his detailed treatment of the early church fathers in *Theology and Identity*. But it is enough to give us some indication of how he views post-Enlightenment theology. And it is precisely around the issue of epistemology, the subject of much of this essay so far, where he has his problems with it. To ignore all the modern theologians as well as those of the Reformation need not necessarily imply that he sees no worth in them. But it does say something about how irrelevant he deems them to be, especially in the African context. Conversely, his concentration on African theologians and African thinking says something about how neglected he deems these to be and how relevant their contribution is to the Christian theological enterprise. Although educated in Europe and obviously fully aware of the European contribution to theology, by ignoring it in his own theology he is implying that the days of the hegemony of European theology are over. He is more explicit in this assertion when developing the idea of the movement of the centre of gravity of Christianity from the north to the south, which is a persistent theme in his writings. He develops this theme on the basis of the massive success story of Christianity in Africa. The reception and subsequent translation of the gospel into the African idiom (which includes the issue of language but goes beyond this into epistemological and cultural categories) implies that what Europe has lost because of the Enlightenment Africa has found because it has never experienced the Enlightenment. To reinforce this idea further Bediako argues that the primal religions of Africa have provided the epistemological and cultural substructure for reception of the Christian gospel. He contends that what the missionaries failed to do was

<sup>15</sup> Bediako K 1995. *Christianity in Africa the Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh University Press and Orbis Books, p. 104.



recognize the validity of African religion as preparation for the gospel. If they had done this, then the reception of the missionary message would have been far better. When the missionaries allowed the translation of the scriptures into the vernacular they were preparing to make themselves redundant. Where Africans themselves translated the message into the African idiom they became much more successful missionaries than the Europeans ever were.

Two further comments in the piece quoted above shed more light on the implicit criticisms that Bediako is making of the modern theological project. First there is the reference to Christian truth, the affirmations of which are the source of its power, being “shunted ... into the siding of mere opinion” and the fact that the “real encounter with alternative viewpoints and interpretations of reality takes place not in words alone, but in the realm of the spirit and in the things of the spirit.”

These are two highly suggestive and remarkably trenchant criticisms of modern European theology. The railway metaphor is a graphic description of Bediako’s summary of the overall impact of the Enlightenment on the heart of the Christian message – that is to extract the life out of it and make it irrelevant and useless. The reference to the real encounter between differing interpretations of reality, by which he must mean Western and non-Western interpretations, as taking place “not in words alone but in the realm of the spirit and things of the spirit” is an equally audacious criticism. The implication is that Bediako situates himself and his theological project in a profoundly adversarial relationship with theologies that have made the epistemological concessions to the European Enlightenment that he deems so destructive. Bediako’s evangelical sentiments are surfacing here as the language used clearly resonates with the age-old battle that evangelicals have had with moderns since the nineteenth century. But there is more to it than this. The contention is not so much a doctrinal one, which defines the evangelical/liberal divide, but an epistemological one. That is, it is to do with constructions of reality, ways of understanding the world, and not simply dogmatic difference, and it is this that makes Bediako’s particular battle with the West different from that of the historical debates between evangelicals and liberals.<sup>16</sup>

It is this continual return to the issue of epistemology and worldview that I have found so profoundly helpful in my own theological pilgrimage and I will return to this shortly. However, it must be said that I disagree with Bediako that the modern theological project has had the effect of rendering Christian affirmations as mere personal opinion. On the contrary, the modern theological project was a concerted and brave attempt to retrieve the relevance of the Christian story in the face of overwhelming contradictions of its epistemological foundations. It could be argued, in fact, that the modern theologians were attempting to save the Christian gospel from being shunted onto a sidetrack of personal opinion. Whether it succeeded in doing this is another question. While one cannot so easily dismiss the modern theologians as Bediako seems to do, one has to admit that the overall effect of the Enlightenment was to absent God from the universe and, in the process, to disenchant the universe. Doing theology in the wake of the Enlightenment, therefore, was doing theology in the absence of God, not in the presence of God. Modern theologians did theology without having God, but they did have the void that was left by God. And they thought and spoke about this void with extraordinary eloquence. Tillich remembers God as

<sup>16</sup> The fact that, in spite of the differences that evangelicals have with liberals, they argue for the validity of creation over evolution (for example) on the basis that they believe creation to be more scientifically feasible than evolution demonstrates that they are using the same legitimating framework and thus the same epistemological paradigm as liberals.

the ground of all being; Schleiermacher remembers God as the feeling of absolute dependence; Bultmann remembers God in the decision to live authentically; Kierkegaard remembers God in the absurd; Rahner remembers God in humankind's latent consciousness of the transcendent; Von Harnack remembers God in the moral teachings of Jesus; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, awaiting trial and final execution at the hands of the Nazis, sums it all up in this quite astonishing assertion: "The world that has come of age is more godless, and for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age."<sup>17</sup>

It is mistaken, I believe, to dismiss what is both the pathos and genius of these thinkers, which is an attempt to find God in a world that has been emptied of God. Theirs is an expression of vulnerability not unlike the vulnerability subscribed to by Bediako in Turner's second feature of the primal worldview – that is, the deep sense that humankind is finite and weak and in need of a supernatural power.

This raises the broader question of the influence of the European Enlightenment, which Bediako has quite rightly raised. The Enlightenment did three things. Firstly, it established the centrality of the organized habit of criticism, or the political demand for the right to question everything. Credulity, the penchant easily to believe, was the pet aversion of the scholars of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Secondly, it carried forward what had already begun in the previous century concerning the disenchantment of the universe, that is it had to be rid of what Charles Darwin called caprice of any magic, or agency of and in itself. In other words, it had to be an inanimate, objectified world, if the truth was to be found. Thirdly, it elicited a passionate concern for equality and justice. All three of these have constituted the core of the intellectual legacy of the West ever since the eighteenth century, and all three have been potentially lethal for theology. Reason was set against faith, truth had nothing to do with religion, and belief in God was considered inimical to equality and justice. In the light of this it is no wonder that Bediako considers the Enlightenment to be destructive for theology. The question is whether there is anything in the Enlightenment, as described above, that has been beneficially appropriated into Christian theology and whether these things are absent from African theology and, if so, what this has meant for African theology. It may be helpful to examine this question in the light of each of the three characteristics of the Enlightenment as I have characterized them above.

Firstly, there is the issue of credulity. Westerners are constantly amazed at the credulity of Africans when it comes to issues of God, the transcendent, and the supernatural. One could relate this with Bediako's argument that the hearty reception that the Christian gospel has experienced in Africa is due to the fact that it is fundamentally a 'non-Western' religion. In other words it is much easier for Africans to believe the Bible and to believe in Christ because their disposal towards these things is a matter of culture and identity. This should not imply, however, that this credulity applies across the board. On the contrary, Africans have always been sceptical, for example, of the motivation of Europeans, missionary or otherwise, from the earliest encounters between Africa and Europe. African theology is also critical of the influence of Western culture on the gospel. One could say, therefore, that African theology has questions to ask, but these are not the same questions that are asked by Western theology. Gustavo Gutierrez made this clear in his landmark address in Dar es Salaam in 1978: The question people in the south were asking "is not how we are to talk about God in a world come of age, but how we are to tell people who are scarcely human that God is love and that God's love makes us one family."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer D 1971. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition, SCM Press Ltd, London, p. 362.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Dorrien, G. "American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Decline, Renewal, Ambiguity." *Cross Currents*, Winter, 2005-06, Vol 55, No. 4, p. 4.

Issues of the world come of age apart, however, it is not apparent that African theology is asking other kinds of questions that need to be asked. For example there seems little trenchant theological critique from an African perspective around issues of ethnicity, political corruption, the environment, and the role and status women.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly there is the issue of disenchantment. Disenchantment has to do not only with the absencing of God from the universe but with ridding the universe of agency, or, in Darwin's terms, of caprice. This was in fact beginning to happen a century before the European Enlightenment. The primal worldview is very similar to the worldview that prevailed in seventeenth century Europe when Isaac Newton was beginning to formulate his cosmology. Newton also happened to be rather partial to a magical view of the universe, but eventually rejected it on the grounds that it contradicted the idea of a transcendent, omnipotent Creator who could impose his will by divine fiat in the created order. The mechanistic worldview of Newton, Boyle, and others, all of whom were theists, displaced an animistic worldview because the seventeenth century scientists wanted ultimate power to belong to God not to nature. By the time Robespierre, the atheist, invented a deist form of God during the bloodletting of the French Revolution the necessity for disenchantment as an epistemological category had become established. This, very briefly, is how theistic notions of God led to deistic notions of God which led to atheistic notions of God and how modern science eventually became associated with atheism. In the process the world became disenchanted, that is rid of the divine.

It is interesting that the one aspect of the African worldview that Bediako and other African theologians have found difficulty in reconciling with Christian theism is that of the divinities that 'swarm' all over the earth. Bediako has also developed the idea that Christian theism has led to the necessary desacralization of the universe.

What African societies seem to stand in need of is a new conception of power that will eliminate sacral overtones. But desacralization need not mean secularization, while the 'spiritual' character of the African view of life should remain.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of divine power belonging only to God and not to the chief or the king is viewed as a healthy consequence of theism, but it is not that far removed from the secularism that Bediako wishes to avoid. However this does not contradict his affirmation of Turner's six feature analysis of the primal worldview. In my opinion, it is the association of this worldview with African Christianity that is the most attractive feature of Bediako's theology. The 'enchanted' worldview of primal thought could be the most important contribution of an African Christianity in the modern context. I will expand on this later, suffice to say now that I find Carl Jung's comment that "one half of the world ... grows strong on a doctrine fabricated by human ratiocination; (while) the other half sickens from the lack of a myth commensurate with the situation"<sup>21</sup> a relevant description of the disenchanted, modern universe.

This brings me to the third characteristic of the Enlightenment – that is the passionate concern for equality and justice. Equality and justice as political categories really only became central with the advent of the French Revolution, in itself an expression of the European Enlightenment. The battle cry – *liberte, egalite, fraternite* – summed up this

<sup>19</sup> An exception on this latter issue is, of course to be found in African womanist theologians such as Mercy Amba Odoyuye and Isabel Phiri.

<sup>20</sup> Bediako, K, *Christianity in Africa*, p, 182.

<sup>21</sup> Heisig J 1989. "The Mystique of the Nonrational and a New Spirituality" in *Archetypal Process- Self and Divine in Whitehead, Jung, and Hillman*, Griffiths D (ed.), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 167-203, p. 174.

passion. The French philosophers egregiously fostered a culture of equality and justice without reference to religious notions of God. Thus came about the invention of humanism as an essentially Enlightenment idea. It happened against the backdrop of the collapse of the *ancient regime*, in other words, the collapse of feudalism. It appeared impossible that such ideals could be expressed within the context of feudalism. If it is true that feudalism, at least in principle, is not dead as an idea in African societies, then is it true to ask whether the ideas of equality and justice as developed in Europe and nurtured through democracy have any purchase where democracy has not taken root in Africa?<sup>22</sup> Certainly it is not apparent that equality and justice enjoys front burner status in African theology. But African theology is not unique in this regard. The ideological impulses of religious thinking, as opposed to its utopian ones (to use Mannheim's categories) obtain wherever religion is being exercised by those with power.

The issues of justice and equality are not apparent, *per se*, in Bediako's theology. My own opinion is that the reason for this is not because Bediako does not see them as important but because they are normally associated with humanist (*qua* Enlightenment) thinking. This, in turn, should not be dissociated with Bediako's own story. In his 'other life' before his conversion he was steeped in French philosophy and European thinking. He apparently believes that this got him closer neither to God nor to himself as an African. The other dynamic that I believe is operating here is one that is frequently found amongst African intellectuals who have had exposure to European thinking. Ever since the encounter between Europe and Africa there has been a tendency for Europeans to despise or dismiss Africans as intellectually backward. In the modern era this goes back to Hegel and other European philosophers who were particularly explicit about this. While this kind of explicitness has become politically incorrect it does not mean that these sentiments do not still exist, much to the pain and ire of African intellectuals. Bediako is no exception.

To summarize Bediako's influence on my own thinking: I have been persuaded by him that there is such a thing as an African identity, that this identity is not simply related to culture but that it also has to do with epistemology, and that differences at this level need to be understood if the encounter between Europe and Africa are to be understood. This is in keeping with my initial desire to try to understand how it is that people living in the same society mentally construct that society so differently, and what the theological implications of this are. I have also been convinced that an epistemology other than that defined by Descartes and other seminal European thinkers, as hegemonic as it is for modern thinking, might lead to what Ghandi called 'the mastery of nature' but with the profound consequence of loss of integration with nature because of its association with the idea not of relationship but with control. This, in turn, is associated with the process of disenchantment and objectification of the universe. This has opened up the whole field of relation ontology, crudely and superficially defined by so-called *ubuntu* philosophy.

Postmodernism has pushed to the fore many of the issues in which I have been engaged over the past ten years. While not everyone would go with Lyotard's assertion of the collapse of the meta-narrative of modernity, it clearly does not have the same influence that it had twenty years ago. Pluralism, recognition of the validity of different narratives,

<sup>22</sup> The relationship between religion, equality, and justice, does not seem always to be an obvious one. In the Enlightenment the idea developed that, in fact, religion was incompatible with equality and justice. The hierarchical nature of power in feudal setups is usually legitimized by some religious reference. However, religion may inspire ideals of equality and justice – as the liberation theologians have demonstrated. But the subversive impulses of religious thought, as inspirational as they are to equality and justice, depend on who is exercising them. This is why I found Mannheim's thinking helpful. He argued that religion can be used both as ideology or utopia – depending on who was using it.

dissatisfaction with secularism, and increased interest in spirituality and the divine, all offer unprecedented opportunities for new and exciting avenues of theological exploration.<sup>23</sup> Since the epistemological crisis of the mid-1990's my own path has headed towards the world, in true Enlightenment fashion. However, my rootedness in Africa has forced me to find God in the world, not beyond the world. My own inclination, which I trace back to the fascination for what the Bediakos call the primal worldview, is toward imminent notions of the divine and the re-enchantment of the universe. I have discovered many others who are travelling on this path, including both scientists and theologians and am deeply indebted to the Bediakos who have assisted me on this journey.

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<sup>23</sup> For a further exploration of this see Balcomb A, "The Great Comeback of God(s) – theological challenges and opportunities in a post-secular world", unpublished inaugural lecture delivered on 13/11/07.