Coloniality and Theological Method in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to approach the heuristic potency of coloniality illustrated by reference to the emergence of African theologies. Coloniality refers to subjugating strategies found in mission discourses which are not unrelated to wider colonial violence. It will be argued that such an analytic category, which arises from historical experiences of mission malpractice, has particular theological and methodological significance. Consequently, post-colonial Anglicanisms will affirm particularism, experiential interfaces and inductive theologizing.

KEYWORDS: African Theology, Anglicanism, coloniality, experience, inductive, Mbiti, particularism, post-colonialism

Introduction

In a work published in 1966, Frederick Welbourn and Bethwell Ogot predicted that by the end of the century 'Africa will be overtly less Christian than today'.[2] They assumed that a poorly contextualized Christianity, which undoubtedly included African Anglicanism, would be rejected in favour of a myth (Africanism) more sustainable in and supportive of a post-colonial Africa. The reason for this false prognosis may well be that Welbourn and Ogot underestimated the resistance, rejection and hybridizing found, not only in the African Initiated Churches (AICs) but also within the mainline denominations and amongst the writings of African theologians emerging especially

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2. F.B. Welbourn and B.A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home: A Study of Two Independent Churches in Western Kenya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 143.

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in the era of independence. Such assumptions remain. For even now African Anglican theologizing is often understood as ambivalent towards colonial and missionary incursion and presented as conservative in terms that correlate with North Atlantic conservatism. This is not necessarily the case.

A post-colonial approach to African Anglican theologies will disrupt the entrenched and exported/imported discourses of the North Atlantic Churches and academies and, it is hoped, unsettle such assumptions, rebut the tendency to universalize Western particularities while at the same time ever increasing the capacity for contrapuntal practices of communion. While that might be the ultimate aim of a post-colonial Anglicanism, the current article will neither finally delineate what, in practice, that might mean nor presume to plot such a transformative trajectory. Rather, the more modest purpose of the present article is to approach the heuristic potency of coloniality illustrated by reference to the emergence of African theologies.[3]

Why Coloniality?

Colonialism, as an analytic category, is not nearly as potent in explanatory power as might be expected. For, on the one hand, it is not the case that missionaries were simply colonialist agents. On the other hand, there is evidence in the assumptions and practices of many missionaries, which could be described as proto-colonialist and colonialist.[4] In terms

3. As will be seen in this article, my own concern, without ignoring more recent developments, is to re-examine the significance of first-generation African theologians through a post-colonial lens. Besides the works referred to elsewhere in this article, for recent introductions to and issues in African theologies see, for example, Kwame Bediako, 'African Theology', in David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 1997), pp. 426–44; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); J.N.K. Mugambi and Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (eds.), *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 3rd edn, 2003); Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro (eds.), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and The Church in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006); Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006); Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007).

4. For example, see A.J. Temu, *British Protestant Missions* (London: Longman, 1972); Robert W. Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978). See also Brian Stanley (ed.), *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis

of both chronology and commitment to colonialism, the expansion of Anglicanism to Africa and its relation to imperialism are not straightforward. Consequently, a general theory explaining the relationship between mission and empire will not be submitted here. Rather, the analytic category of coloniality is submitted as descriptive of (mal)-practices arising from the historical realities of mission and/or colonialism and significant for the ongoing post-colonial theologizing within Anglicanism. For the purpose of the present article, coloniality will be understood as a state or process subjugating culture and/or agency by incursive cultural and, in this case, theological discourses.[5] While, I argue, such a definition describes well the practice of much evangelizing in Africa, it is its theological significance that will be of particular focus here. There are at least three reasons for the theological significance of coloniality. One might refer to these reasons as relating to the histories or narratives of Western theologies, the critical awareness of such theologies and the liberative function of theologies as contended for especially by theologians from beyond the North Atlantic academies.

First, theological justification exists for colonial incursion and subjugation.[6] Max Warren's 'theology of imperialism' justifies empire with reference to the theological categories of providence, vocation, order and greater good.[7] Despite being an Anglican priest and general secretary of the Church Missionary Society, taking up the role in 1942, he shies away from providing any ecclesiological justification. The editor of the first edition of *The Colonial Church Chronicle* in 1847, which coincides with the consecration of the first Anglican bishop to be sent to Africa, is not so bashful.[8] He sees the theological significance

(F'note continued)

Books, 2004), pp. 220–30, 302–313. Norman Etherington (ed.), *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. *Discourse* here refers to how particular knowledge comes to be seen as legitimate by the practice and networking of, in this case, particular missionaries, scholars and institutions. See Uriah Y. Kim, *Decolonizing Josiah: Toward a Post-colonial Reading of the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), pp. 20–21; Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 385–410.

6. See Rowan Strong, *Anglicanism and the British Empire c. 1700–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1–40, 283–94.

7. M.A.C. Warren, *Caesar The Beloved Enemy: Three Studies in the Relation of Church and State* (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 30–41.

8. Robert Gray (1809–1872) was consecrated as Bishop of Cape Town. Robert S. Bosher, *The American Church and the Formation of the Anglican Communion, 1823–1853* (Evanston: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1962), pp. 16–17.

of colonialism in ecclesiological as well as providential terms. It is providentially significant that a Christian nation should rise to power with the capacity to universalize its values. It is ecclesiologically significant. For such expansion is an opportunity to plant the worldwide 'Reformed Catholic Church', thus undermining the Roman Catholic critique that the Church of England is insular.[9]

Such expansionist theology, in the case of the *Chronicle*, explicitly functions as a response to alleged ecclesiological dysfunction. Warren's theologizing, explicitly and implicitly, functions as a response to alleged cultural dysfunction. The rise of empire is providential because, unlike African traditions, it can act as a *preparatio* for the Gospel. The universal vision of the empire, in contrast to the localism of traditional practices, inspires vocation. Colonization brings, in contrast to social structures that existed before, the permanent good of legislation, political betterment and cohesion. The scope of the empire, again unlike traditional societies, can evoke in its subjects a commitment to a greater good and broader Commonwealth.[10]

Second, if post-colonial theorists are guilty of excluding the religious from post-colonialism then theologians are equally guilty of excluding post-colonialism from their theologizing.[11] Theology is critical when it resists, what Johann Baptist Metz calls a 'privatizing tendency' in favour of addressing itself to public or political concerns.[12] However,

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See G.C. Boase, 'Fulford, Francis (1830–1868)', rev. H.C.G. Matthew, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) [Accessed on April 29, 2008 at http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10223].

9. 'Extension of the Reformed Catholic Church', *Colonial Church Chronicle* (July 1847–June 1848), pp. 3–5 (3). See 'Systematic Colonization', *Colonial Church Chronicle* (July 1848), pp. 2–6. For the history of the term 'Anglican' and 'Anglican Communion' see Kevin Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 3–5, 296–318; W.M. Jacob, *The Making of the Anglican Church Worldwide* (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 144–93.

10. Warren, *Caesar The Beloved Enemy*, pp. 26–40. This same notion of the inability of societies to relate to broadening horizons has also been employed to explain conversion. See Robin Horton, 'African Conversion', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41.2 (1971), pp. 85–108.

11. R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 25–28. See Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 1–11.

12. John B. Metz, 'Religion and Society in the Light of a Political Theology', *Harvard Theological Review* 61.4 (1968), pp. 507–523 (507). See Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*

despite the continued justifications of European or Anglo-American Christian expansionism by missiologists and mission historians, there remains much work to be done uncovering how imperialism and colonialism have often influenced Western theology.[13] The existence of this lacuna undermines the ongoing claim that such theology, practised in the traditional colonial centres, is in fact critical. The challenge to the critical nature of theology is even stronger when it is recognized that theologies emerging in colonial and post-colonial Africa explicitly critique Western theologizing. In practical terms, responding to coloniality will therefore mean, at the very least, an engagement with marginalized theology and theologians.[14]

Post-colonialism seeks to critique or undermine Western hegemony.[15] This too is, in large part, the reason for the rise of African theologies in the era of independence. Consequently, it is possible to see the emergence of African theologies as a constituent part of the broad field of post-colonial literature and as part of a movement for decolonization.[16] It is the liberative engagement with coloniality and its social, cultural, political and theological effects that ultimately define the 'post-colonial' even if the authors of such material do not see themselves in such terms.[17] African theologies are, I argue, often both historically

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and Biblical Interpretation, pp. 2, 117–22; Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996), pp. 130–41.

13. For a recent attempt at this see Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). See also Ian T. Douglas and Kwok Pui-Lan (eds.), *Beyond Colonial Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2001); Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera (eds.), *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

14. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 201.

15. Georg M. Gugelberger and Diana Brydon, 'Postcolonial Cultural Studies' in Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth and Imre Szeman (eds.), *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2nd edn, 2005), pp. 756–68 (757).

16. That is to say, it is possible to understand it as post-colonial literature in the more technical sense of displaying themes present in other writings well established as post-colonial literature. It is of course uncontroversial to refer to African theology as post-colonial literature in the sense that much of it was produced in the era of Independence.

17. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2nd edn, 2002), p. 197.

and critically post-colonial. They raise and direct the question to the North Atlantic academies: what form will your theology take given the violence of coloniality, violence which incursive Christian theologizing played a part in perpetrating?

Third, the main concern of Western theologies is often seen as coherence. The recognition of coloniality will result in a rejection of such a narrow view. Instead, some sort of liberative practice will be the end goal for theologies.[18] Acts 17 is the story of Paul in Thessalonica. As a result of his preaching some are convinced and are converted. Some are not convinced and start a riot. The rioters complain: 'These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also…They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus' (Acts 17.6-7).

Interestingly, without reference to Acts 17, Robert Young identifies the essence of post-colonialism as a turning of the world upside down.[19] Some understood the earliest followers of Jesus to be challenging the empire as they declared the divine intent to bring down 'the powerful from their thrones, and lift up the lowly' (Lk. 1.52). The christological claims of these Christians were understood, at least in Acts 17, to stand opposed to the temporal claims of the emperor.[20] Expansionist theology suppresses this 'upside down' theologizing in favour of an 'inside out' theologizing. That is to say, theology is done at the centre and deductively applied to the places beyond or below.

18. For the possible indebtedness post-colonial theology might have to liberation theology, see the introduction to Keller, Nausner and Rivera (eds.), *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, pp. 1–19. See J.N.K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), pp. 160–80.

19. Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 2. See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), pp. 23–25.

20. This, it appears, changes with the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century. See J.N.K. Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1989), pp. 52–57; Christopher Rowland, 'Render to God what belongs to God', *New Blackfriars* 70.830 (2007), pp. 365–371. It is worthy of note that, as far as I am aware, not one of the papers presented at the 'Church Identity/ies and Postcolonialism' conference at the University of Manchester in May 2008 dealt directly with relationships between church and state. Undoubtedly, Anglican theologians engaging with the post-colonial will need to address the issue of the (dis)establishment of the Church of England.

Such centres exist because of the resources they possess. The ongoing Anglo-American mission expansion in Africa does not arise from inherently superior commitment to mission. Rather, it arises from a greater store of disposable income.[21] However else one might understand liberative practice it will, therefore, not exclude the concrete issues of social justice in a world where globalization appears to be nothing less than an attempt to 'synchronize' the majority of the world with the 'reigning ideology of Global Capitalism'.[22]

Young observes that post-colonialism is 'distinguished by an unmediated secularism'. It is committed to excluding religious (and theological) attempts to provide alternative value-systems to those of the West. He submits that what he refers to as a 'spiritual' approach to decolonization will emphasize individual self-rule, duty over rights, non-violent resistance and a critique of the Western obsession with materiality.[23] It is not clear yet, especially in light of the theological justifications for empire and the subjects addressed by African theologies, if these are the themes that will emerge in post-colonial Anglicanisms. However, given the historical and theological rationale for post-colonialism, and specifically the category of coloniality, some methodological characteristics can be identified.

Methodological Lessons from African Theologies

In the light of experiences of subjugation, the need for a rigorous practice of critical awareness, an engagement with marginalized theologizing and hope for liberative practice, at least three methodological priorities can be identified, which begin to address these issues.

First, a method that has a particularist characteristic stands in contrast to the expansionist theology already referred to. For such theologizing and its attendant missionary malpractice do not take

21. See J.N.K. Mugambi's 'Introduction', in John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2001 [1963]), pp. xi–xxxv. For the debate on the profitability of the British Empire see Avner Offer, 'The British empire, 1870–1914: a waste of money?', *Economic History Review* 46.2 (1993), pp. 215–38; Patrick K. O'Brien, 'The Cost and Benefits of British Imperialism 1846–1914', *Past and Present* 120.1 (1988), pp. 163–200 (175–86); Young, *Postcolonialism*, pp. 15–43.

22. J.N.K. Mugambi, 'Religions in East Africa in the Context of Globalization', in J.N.K. Mugambi and Mary N. Getui (eds.), *Religions in Eastern Africa Under Globalization* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2004), pp. 3–29 (10); See Ivan Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008), pp. 20–24.

23. Young, *Postcolonialism*, p. 338.

place in the abstract. Too often mission Christianity assumes that the component parts of theology, which include tradition, theologian and context, are self-evident. A particularist approach will undermine such naivety.[24]

The early work of John Mbiti, who some consider to be the father of modern African theology, can be seen as a particularist approach. His early theology, specifically his work on eschatology, arises from experience of missionary malpractice in a particular place at a particular time.[25] In effect, he challenges the way theology is practised by these missionaries and, by implication, challenges the way theology is practised in North Atlantic academies. For he unsettles the identity of theologian, tradition and context. Theologians become those who reflect on their encounter with God with or without explicit reference to the Christ of Scripture. Tradition is expanded to include the pre-missionary wisdom of indigenous theologizing. Context, therefore, is not only the physical and cultural space that missionaries move into. It is also the public, political and/or ecclesiastical space where some discourses are permitted, some are legitimized, some are suppressed and where others resist, subvert and hybridize.

Mbiti, read according to his own initial approach, is not simply involved in an exercise in comparative or contextual theology. Such African theology, even from what Josiah Young calls 'the old guard', loses its significance when either the theologians themselves or readers of their theology separate it from the experiences of coloniality.[26] To the extent Mbiti's work retains a particularist approach, it is post-colonial and thus seeks some form of theological decolonization. In this context, a particularist approach will mean the recognition and search for theological significance arising from distinct groups asserting their identity and practice in the face of Western expansion.

Second, maintaining the critical nature of theology will be served by, what might be termed, the experiential interface. In a bid to take account of the agency of converts, in the face of post-colonial interpretations of mission, Brian Stanley suggests that 'the scholar adopt' the

24. Particularism refers to the theological point of departure. It should not be assumed that it is synonymous with isolationism. Rather, it is hoped that what one might term, 'particularisms in relation' will develop.

25. John S. Mbiti, 'Christian Eschatology in Relation to the Evangelization of Tribal Africa', PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1963; John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (London: SPCK, 1971).

26. Josiah U. Young, *African Theology: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 13–24.

world of the 'indigenous receptor'.[27] Such an assumption that, in the case of Mbiti, an Akamba perspective can simply be adopted through mental activity and 'inhabited' by the academic denies agency to those belonging to the context. In short, there is a form of particularism that amounts to the colonization of method. For, according to such an approach, a Western scholar can occupy the same enuciative space as African converts, speak on their behalf and at the same time justify missionary incursion. Methodologically speaking, more is needed.[28] Consequently, the primacy of the experiential interface is submitted as a second methodological characteristic.

Mbiti's work arises from the experience of mission Christianity and the subjugation of contextualization. That is to say, his theology emerges from the experiential interface between missionaries and converts. However, that there is a move away from this experiential site to an approach that grounds the emerging theology on so-called African traditional religion has not been recognized and the implications have not been identified. No longer does the emergence of an African theology depend primarily on theologically significant engagements between converts and missionaries (what might be called an emic approach). Instead, the emerging theology becomes grounded upon a categorizing of 'traditional practice', which supposedly stands independent of the engagement with mission Christianity (what might be called an etic approach). Traditional practice is considered an abstraction. This betrays the fabric of Western ways of theologizing, which Mbiti is seeking to criticize, and leaves less and not more room for African agency in his thought.[29]

It seems that Mbiti's initial approach, which emphasizes the Akamba critique and response to mission theologizing, is sound. While such work might be challenged as being subjective it is, arguably, more critical than his later work. For it is theological reflection on the experience of evangelization and colonization and not the abstraction and construction of a so-called 'traditional' foundation upon which African theology might be built. It is emerging theology and not expansionist theology. It refuses to provide a new *preparatio*, which is as idealized as Warren's imperial *preparatio*.

27. Brian Stanley, 'Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind?', *International Review of Mission* 92.366 (2003), pp. 315–31 (317). See Robert S. Heaney, 'Conversion to Coloniality: Avoiding the Colonization of Method', *International Review of Mission* 97.384/5 (2008), pp. 65–77.

28. See Heaney, 'Conversion to Coloniality', pp. 71–77.

29. See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970 [1969]), pp. 19–36.

Third, a methodology that is inductive and seeks liberative practice contrasts theologies that are chiefly concerned with coherency and deductive application. Such liberative practice will inevitably move towards some sort of theological decolonization. As has been seen, such decolonizing might begin with a particularist approach and the affirmation of an experiential interface. For this undercuts the assumption that the Western scholar can inhabit (colonize) the perspective of Africans who theologize in response to the violence of coloniality. Theologically, however, more is being claimed for theological decolonizing when the method is seen as inductive.

Theological decolonization is not only incursive perspective being disrupted and problematized by counter-discourses from Africa. It is also the recognition that knowledge of God emerges from the presence and experience of those encountering coloniality. This includes, as emerging African theologies often indicate, the recognition that revelation arises from practice, pre and post the missionary movement. Theological knowledge does not primarily expand by missionary agency from Christians centres but emerges by divine agency from African experience and thought. Consequently, the fundamental theological category of revelation, along with the categories of theologian, tradition and context, is hybridized. For the binary representations of 'tradition' versus 'revelation' are erased.

Such theological erasure or blurring is not necessarily evidence of theological dysfunction nor the denial of divine agency. On the contrary, intentional hybridizing is an exercise in asserting agency, which, if seen as a means to theological decolonizing, becomes part of the divine intent for human liberation. It is doubtful then that any notion of expansionism will be theologically constructive to such an approach. The mistake that Warren makes is that he emphasizes institutional expansion, which then finds its corollary in colonial expansion. In sum, the mission of both church and state is to subdue the Other. In contrast, the best of African theologies emphasize not an expansion of an institution but a participation in the divine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, methodological characteristics, as opposed to a prescriptive method, have been identified in the course of this short article. In place of expansionism, particularism has been proposed. In order for theology to continue to be critical, the primacy of an experiential interface has been identified. In place of a theology emphasizing

coherence and deductiveness, an inductive approach moving towards liberative practice has been favoured.

Warren finds in the New Testament a 'subordinationist ethic'. Post-colonial African theologies, emerging from the experiences and critique of coloniality, find a subversive ethic that rejects the way in which colonial perspectives have been inscribed upon Christian Scripture, Christian theology and Christian mission. In place of an expansionist model, where the institution of church spreads from England to the world, there emerges the ongoing challenge to develop participatory theologies and ecclesiologies. This participatory understanding of revelation and theology not only undermines colonial perspectives but, in the final analysis, also provokes an approach that is liberative, contextual and thoroughly practical.