
I. African Theology

A. Multiple understandings of African Theology (Lartey):

1. Articulation of concepts of God in traditional African religions as well as ways of talking about God in Islam and Christianity (Lartey 2)

2. The nature of the theology of Africans and people of African descent with most common usage related to African Christian discourse (Lartey 2).

B. Key points in the history of African Theology and African Christianity:

1. Early Christian theology was shaped by important African theologians including Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine of Hippo in the 3rd & 4th c. CE (Lartey 2)

2. Alexandrian church took Christianity south to Ethiopia in 4th c forming the Axumite church (the predecessor to the modern Ethiopian Orthodox Church) (Lartey 3)
   a) Coptic Christianity rejected Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) – two natures of Christ (human and divine), instead, 3 African churches (Coptic church of Egypt, Nubian and Ethiopian churches) became Monophysite churches

3. Invention of monastic movement in Africa – Egyptian Pachomius (290-346) influenced later monastics Cassian, Basil of Caesarea, and Benedict of Nursia, emphasizing life of austerity in community (Lartey 3). (coenobitic monasticism v. anchoritic [solitary]).

4. African theology formed during European colonialism/slavery – Ottobah Cugoano (Gold Coast 18th c.); Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vasa), Jacobus Capitein (never a slave argued that slavery was not incompatible with Christian freedom in 18th c.); Edward Blyden (Liberia) – recognized African identity problem as a result of European racial theories and was first to propose cultivation of African indigenous values. Samuel Crowther (Nigerian) was African Anglican Bishop who recognized value of African traditional religions and argued that Christianity should be translated into African traditional idiom (acculturation). Lartey 4

5. Missionary Christianity of the 19th c. contributions to African society – establishment of schools, introduction of Western medical systems, social
advancement of African society including end of capital punishment and slavery; creation of vernacular alphabets, grammars, and dictionaries in African languages (Onyinah 306).

6. **Ethiopianism** – African nationalist Christianity that represented a cultural protest against white domination of the churches (Onyinah 307)

7. **Prophetic movements** – individual leaders who arose from lower strata of society to challenge the authority of the missionaries by an emphasis on healing and blending Christianity and African traditional cultural practices. In the 1920s and 1930s, the prophets broke away from mainline churches to form independent churches, representing the beginning of African Initiated Churches (AIC) (Onyinah 307)

8. **Theology arising in 1950s & beyond in response to struggles for African nationalism** – emerged from western trained intellectuals as well as grass-roots movements of workers seeking to end colonial rule:

   a) **Negritude** – Senghor of Senegal – totality of black experience (cognition, culture, values, & spirituality) in its distinctiveness from western rationality – Lartey 4.


   c) Rise and growth of AICs (African initiated or independent churches) – made use of vernacular and were innovative in church practices, rituals, and theology.

   d) Africanization – theologians such as Mbiti, Idowu, and Kwesi Dickson which encourage Christian dialogue with African traditional religion and culture in search for authentic African Christianity (Lartey 4).

   (1) Lartey’s definitions of inculturation – changes in African life and culture as a result of Christian faith. (Christian influence on Africanness) (cf. Isichei 331).

   (2) Lartey’s acculturation – attempts to use African elements in the practice of Christianity. (African influence on Christianity) (indigenization of the faith).

   (3) Criticism against this older theologians – they were unable to free themselves from Eurocentric analyses; and they failed to address challenging social issues in Africa such as poverty, economic and political instability, oppression, sexism (Lartey 4).

9. More recent foci in African Theology

   a) Addressing socioeconomic inequities in light of the gospel (Lartey 5).
b) Call for African theology to be liberation theology issued in 1977 at the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians (Lartey 5); however, some condemned African liberation theology including Cardinal Ratzinger (the current Pope Benedict) (Isichei 330).

c) Reasons provided by Isichei for the limited nature of African liberation theology outside of South Africa (Isichei 332):

1. The fact that colonialism ended more recently in Africa than the extended time since its end in Latin America
2. Continued economic external influences on African nations
3. African Christianity is more divided by language barriers with language affiliations tying different nations to their previous European colonial lords (French, English, Portuguese)

d) South African black theology took form similar to U.S. black theology of James Cone struggling against discrimination – Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, and others.

e) African theologians continued to struggle with questions regarding the nature of God – as brother, protoancestor, community builder etc. Lartey 5.

10. Characteristics and influences in modern African churches:

a) Many new African churches are influenced by American churches emphasizing ideas such as Pentecostalism, prosperity gospel, verbal inspiration and literal inerrancy of the Bible, the necessity of a conversion experience, millenialist eschatology with catastrophes as signs of the endtimes, interpretation of social problems as demonic, and emphasis on miraculous healing (Isichei 335).

b) Many of these imported theological ideas fit with local African situations such as the Prosperity Gospel is well embraced by white South Africans who feel it reinforces their status. It also fits with traditional African religious views that sought health, prosperity and protection against evil (Isichei 336).

c) Influx of right-wing Protestant missionary societies in Africa emphasizing eternal damnation, shunning missions organizations who are not as exclusivist including evangelicals (such as Billy Graham), exhibiting hostility toward communism with a disregard for social issues (they embrace the ideas of early U.S. fundamentalism of the 1900s) (Isichei 337).

d) Continued influence of traditional religions in African Christianity such as beliefs in traditional healing, spirit possession; others have
moved toward secularity (Isichei 338). Isichei indicates many of these African trends are manifestations of similar worldwide trends which would be named New Age in the western world (I 339).

C. African Views of Salvation:

1. Salvation viewed as a power encounter (Okorocha 59). When Christianity was reintroduced to Africa in the colonial period, it was successful because it was believed that the god of the imperial powers was more powerful (Ok 83).
2. African salvation – enhancement of life; the pursuit of salvation is a religious journey. (Ok 59)
3. Material nature of salvation embodied in religious forms that meet immediate needs and founding principles (Ok. 60).
4. Worldview and socioreligious behavior reveals African concepts of salvation, including the way they express and experience religious values (Ok 62).
5. African view of salvation - wealth, health, posterity (children) and resultant power in contrast to western view of salvation that emphasizes forgiveness (Ok 63-4).
6. Focus of African prayer – abundant life, stress on anthropocentrism – humanity is the center and the present is the focus of African religious life (Ok 72-3).
7. African fear of death (Ok 73).
8. African salvation – total well-being (Ok 76)
9. African salvation is holistic – material and spiritual, no dichotomy between proclamation of the gospel and the practical nature of social action (Ok 76). No separation in African worldview – sacred vs. secular.
10. African salvation – involves belief in social progress exhibited by contemporary status symbols (Ok 85).
11. African society has concept of societal salvation (communalism) with four characteristics – solidarity, mutuality, reciprocity, and altruism:

   a) Solidarity – group consciousness that doesn’t exclude individual rights which includes care of the environment and the community (Ok 87-88).
   b) Mutuality – learning to treat others as we want to be treated, including generosity (Ok 88).
   c) Reciprocity – interdependence including a belief in the redistribution of wealth (Ok 89).
   d) Altruism – living for others.

D. African Pentecostalism
1. Established under foreign Pentecostal missions influenced by Azusa Street revival which gave rise to indigenous Pentecostal churches (Onyinah 307-8).

2. Pentecostal theology and practices

a) Belief that gods, witchcraft, & sorcery are real but God's power is greater (Onyinah 308).

b) Belief in baptism in the Holy Spirit with emphasis on speaking in tongues as well as healing and exorcism (On 308).

c) Pentecostalization of Christianity in Africa – the move towards informal and spontaneous Pentecostal ways of worshiping even in mainline churches (Onyinah 309).

d) Pentecostal leadership emphasizes charisma of leaders. When gifts decrease, church splits occur (Onyinah 310).

e) Pentecostal spirituality – keeps experience and scripture in dialectical tension. Emphasis is on experiential, relational, and emotional, preference on narrative texts with emphasis on eschatological intrusion of the kingdom of God into the present and empowerment for living scripture's promises (Onyinah 310).

f) Emphasis on born again experience in salvation, seen as transformation and empowerment (Onyinah 311)

g) Pentecostal view of salvation included healing of sickness and deliverance from the demonic, and anticipated prosperity (Onyinah 312)

h) Pentecostal views of demon possession – possible for born again persons through multiple means – ancestral or generational curses as a result of family sins; territorial spirits which can influence a nation or region, demonic doorways through idolatry, sinful deeds, traumatic childhood experiences (Onyinah 312-313)

For Further Reading:

DomNwachukwu, Chinaka S. “Soteriology of the African Independent Churches (AICs),” presentation to faculty of the Haggard School of Theology, Fall 2007.


