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# African Theology as Liberating Wisdom

Celebrating Life and Harmony in the Evangelical  
Lutheran Church in Botswana

*By*

Mari-Anna Pöntinen



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*To Samuli, Ville,  
Henrikki and Sakari—basimane ba rona*

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In Helsinki

3rd November 2012

*festum omnium sanctorum*

Mari-Anna Pöntinen



## ABBREVIATIONS

AACC	All Africa Conference of Churches
AICs	African Independent Churches
ANC	African National Congress
ATISCA	Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa
ATR	African traditional religion
BCC	Botswana Council of Churches
BDP	Botswana (former Bechuanaland) Democratic Party
BLLC	Botswana Lutheran Liaison Committee
BPP	Botswana (former Bechuanaland) People's Party
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement
BNAPS	Botswana National HIV/AIDS Prevention Support
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
ELCB	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana
ELCIN	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia
ELCSA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa
ELCSWA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in South-West Africa (former ELCRN)
FELM	Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
LCSA	Lutheran Church of Southern Africa
LMS	London Missionary Society
LTS	Lutheran Theological Seminary
LUCSA	Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa
LUDIBO	Lutheran Diakonia in Botswana
LW	Luther's Works
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
LWI	Lutheran World Information
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
SADCC	Southern African Development Coordination Conference
SARDC	Southern African Research and Documentation Centre
SASO	South African Students' Organisation
SECAM	Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar

SET	Setswana – English (or Setswana – English – Setswana) Dictionary
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
STKJ	Suomalainen Teologinen Kirjallisuusseura
TEF	World Council of Churches' Theological Education Fund
TRC	South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UB	University of Botswana
UCCSA	United Congregational Church of Southern Africa
UEM	United Evangelical Mission
UNISA	University of South Africa
WA	Waimarer Ausgabe
WB	World Bank
WCC	World Council of Churches
WIDSAA	Women in Development Southern Africa Awareness
WNGOC	Women's NGO Coalition

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. *Challenges of African Theology and the Context of the ELCB*<sup>1</sup>

The ultimate challenges on which most African theologians focus are questions about God and human being.<sup>2</sup> In their simplicity, however, these challenges involve the complex issue of African identities, which have been shaped by African religio-cultural traditions and the continent's colonial history.<sup>3</sup> Postcolonial African intellectuals, including theologians, consciously wrestle with the colonial state of being, its violent narratives and subjugation.<sup>4</sup> The former colony, as the scholars emphasise, still functions on psychological, cultural and social spheres of contemporary African realities.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the everyday life of the people is colored by neocolonial exploitation, both on the national and global levels, which also causes political insecurity in many African countries.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, African theologians recognise the postcolonial state of being as a contemporary phenomenon, which requires adequate attention and

---

<sup>1</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Botswana, *Kereke ya Luthere ya Evangele mo Botswana*.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Buthelezi 1973b; Nyamiti 1977; 1978; Mbiti 1980; Éla 1985; Oduyoye 1986; 1997; Setiloane 1986a; Maluleke 1994; Kanyoro 2001; Munyika 2004; Bediako 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Pobee 1996, 21–22. Musimbi Kanyoro (2001, 158–162) deals with the complexity of cultural, colonial, and gendered identities of African women as the basis of doing theology. See also Maluleke, "Identity and Integrity in African Theology: Critical Analysis" (2001); James Cox & Garrie ter Haar (eds.), *Uniquely African? African Christian Identity from Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (2003).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Mudimbe 1988; Mbembe 2001; Dube 2000; Antonio 2006a; Maluleke 2007. Regarding postcolonial discourse, see chapter 2.1.2.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio 2006a, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Regarding neocolony, see Dube 2000, 15–19; Antonio 2006a, 4. Emmanuel Katongole in his article of "Mission and Social Formation: Searching for an Alternative to King Leopold's Ghost" deals with the question of continuous military violence and poverty of many African peoples, which seems not to end. According to Katongole (2002a, 124) like "the frightened villagers in King Leopold's Congo many in Africa today are wondering whether Christianity has any power to save them from this nightmare." See also *The Sacrifice of Africa. A Political Theology for Africa* (Katongole 2011).

conscious work for healing both the inner state of African existence and outward political and ecclesial relationships.<sup>7</sup>

Not only is there the obstacle of the twisted power-relations, but the form of Christianity that was promoted by Western missionaries also made the basic question of being human and relating to God problematic for African Christians.<sup>8</sup> In their early encounters in African contexts, European missionaries juxtaposed the Christian God with Western cultural connotations, which were held as universal. African Christianity, however, could not maintain these Western ideas because of their alienating influence on African identity.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the cultural dominance of Western Christianity also made God look more or less European; distant from what the Divine One meant for Africans.<sup>10</sup> Therefore over the last half-century African theologians have made conscious efforts to interpret the Christian faith in a way relevant to African people.<sup>11</sup> This development can be described in the framework of both contextualisation hermeneutics and the postcolonial enterprise. The former emphasises cultural, social, religious and political efforts; whereas the latter deals with decolonisation as undoing the colonial connotations of Christian interpretations.<sup>12</sup> As a result of this huge theological involvement, African Christianity has recently been recognised as an African religion, distinct

<sup>7</sup> Dube 2000, 16; Antonio 2006a, 1–2. Teresa Okure in her paper *The Church in the Mission Field, Edinburgh 1910; A Nigerian/African Response* (2003) emphasises: “The Church both in the sending and missionary countries has not yet recovered from the illegal marriage of mission with colonialism. As already mentioned [...] this does not mean that Christian missionaries had nothing to offer to the countries in ‘the mission field.’”

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Setiloane 1976, which deals with these difficulties.

<sup>9</sup> Also Antonio 2006a, 11. Regarding universalised theology in missionary outreach, see Bosch 1991, 428; Tutu 1979b, 488.

<sup>10</sup> “Later on, He came, this Son of Man: Like a child delayed He came to us. The White Man brought Him. He was pale, and not the Sunburnt Son of the Desert. As a child He came. A wee little babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. Ah, if only He had been like little Moses lying Sun scorched on the banks of the River of God We would have recognized Him” (Setiloane 1986b, 1).

<sup>11</sup> See Tinyiko Maluleke “Half a Century of African Christian Theologies. Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-first Century” (1997).

<sup>12</sup> Also Antonio juxtaposes these two approaches by talking about inculturation: “I shall raise the specific question of how inculturation is a species of postcolonial discourse which operates through a mode of African self-identification and whose character is necessarily mediated through some of the basic tensions and ambiguities of postcolonial theory itself” (Antonio 2006a, 4). As a term, *contextual theology* was used for the first time in ecumenical circles in 1972, when the World Council of Churches’ Theological Education Fund (TEF) published the report on *Ministry in Context*. Soon the term was used as an umbrella concept for different contextual approaches. About the history of the term, see Küster 1995, 39–45. Regarding the methodological development of African theology, see chapter 2.1.2.

from Western interpretations.<sup>13</sup> Applying the classical formulation of theology as 'faith seeking understanding',<sup>14</sup> the question has been how faith seeks understanding in the contexts of African people and their surrounding realities.

However, during the contextualisation processes, leading figures in African theology have often been accused either of syncretism<sup>15</sup> or Christianising African indigenous spiritual spaces.<sup>16</sup> Both accusations are probably true,<sup>17</sup> but at the same time one needs to ask if any earlier encounter between Christianity and a receiving culture has been free from syncretism.<sup>18</sup> It also seems to be quite hypothetical to draw a strict line between African Christianity and African spiritual origins. Regarding the ultimate focus of African theology as described above, the question thus follows, is it possible to prevent the 'African mind'<sup>19</sup> from using indigenous spiritual spaces in his or her relationship with God? This tension and way of understanding Christ in context has been the stage for African theologians to perform on.<sup>20</sup> Without minimising the position of African traditional religion, it still seems obvious that African Christianity as an African religion draws from the same cultural heritage and rich religious roots.

What then is the identity that African Christianity ultimately embraces? This question has met with different responses, especially in recent decades. In the contemporary discussion African Christianity is often juxtaposed with African Independent Churches (AICs) or African Pentecostal movements, due to their rapid growth both on the African continent as

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Maluleke 2005, 116; 2007, 515. See also Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*. (2003). Already Mbiti (1990, 223–224) on the basis of Ethiopian Coptic Church and North African patristic church, states that Christianity in Africa is so old that it can be regarded as an African religion.

<sup>14</sup> The classical characterising of theology has been formulated by Anselm Canterbury as *fides quaerens intellectum*, 'faith seeking understanding'. Regarding this formulation, see Annala 1993, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1995a, 78) says that she has been recognised as a syncretist especially after her paper, "The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology," which was published in *African Theology en Route*, edited by Kofi Appiah-Kubi & Sergio Torres in 1979.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. in Wiredu 2006a, 318–320; Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2001, 85–94.

<sup>17</sup> Regarding such claims, see chapter 2.2.

<sup>18</sup> Mika Vähäkangas (2010b, 7–8) even states that all religions are "mixtures of different religious-cultural elements" thus "syncretistic" which should lead us rather to discuss about the nature of Christian syncretism and its theological conclusions than holding to "pure Christianity." See also Okure 2003, 23; Newbigin 1997, 1–3.

<sup>19</sup> 'Mind' used in this regard is distinct from Cartesian ideas, explained below.

<sup>20</sup> See Maluleke 1994; Stinton 2004.

well as in Diaspora.<sup>21</sup> These churches have also given rise to such concepts as *received* or *reversed mission*, since many of the churches have started their own vivid mission work among 'spiritually dead' European and North-American societies.<sup>22</sup> However, in this context it needs to be noted that the idea of received mission is not alien in contemporary ecumenical spheres either. Since the mission of the Church is seen as bilateral or even multilateral action,<sup>23</sup> receiving becomes both a challenge and an opportunity for all partners. Yet too often the voices of African churches have been limited merely to ecumenical circles, or remained in the isolation of conference rooms, instead of engaging with Western people on a grass-root level. This grassroot sharing of the Christian faith in the midst of the human sufferings and joys would be beneficial in terms of mission.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, one needs to speak of African Christianities rather than African Christianity in the homogenous sense.<sup>25</sup> Referring merely to the Pentecostal movements or African Independent Churches is thus limiting

<sup>21</sup> E.g. in Cox & Ter Haar 2003, 213–274. Afe Adogame & James Spickard (2010), in their recent editing of *Religion Crossing Boundaries. Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*, divide the development in three different levels: 1) Ethiopian Churches in South Africa and the African Churches in West Africa that flourished from 1890s as a rejection of the Western cultural idioms; 2) AICs that emerged from 1920s and 1930s onward, such as Zionists in South Africa, Kimbanguist Churches in Zaire/Congo, Aladura Churches in Nigeria, Spirit Churches in Ghana, and Roho Churches in East Africa; 3) and the recent development from 1950s onwards of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches both in Africa and African Diaspora (Adogame & Spickard 2010, 5–7). According to Anderson only one quarter of Pentecostals are white Westerners and the gap is continuously increasing (in Kärkkäinen 2010a, 225). See about defining global Pentecostalism in Anderson 2010, 13–16.

<sup>22</sup> Regarding the usage and the history of the concepts, see Hun Kim 2010; Adogame & Spickard 2010, 13–14. According to Adogame & Spickard the new churches also use the similar rhetoric as the early missionaries, regarding Europe as a "dark" or "prodigal" continent in a deep need of mission that saves European heathens.

<sup>23</sup> Bosch (1991, 355, 368–389) speaks of mission as "Church-with-Others" without the subject and object controversy, but rather sharing the Christian faith in accordance with the ecumenical paradigm.

<sup>24</sup> According to Okure (2003, 32) the current crises of Christianity in the West is derived from a failure to ask life-questions in their contexts. Africans could also be offering their "answers to the West as part of our common Christian heritage."

<sup>25</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke, the former President of the South African Council of Churches, presents ten theses on African Christianity, one being African Christianities in plural: "African Christianity is plural not singular. African Christianity is neither perfect nor better Christianity. It is only one Christianity in a (Christian) world full of Christianities. It is not the most powerful of Christianities—despite the shift of Christian gravity; it is one of the youngest. The majority of its adherents are poor and female. But it is one of the most powerful weapons in the hands of its adherents. It is not the most homogenous of Christianities. If anything, it is a cacophonous, colourful cluster of contending Christianities—all hidden under the misleading singular name—'African Christianity'" (Maluleke 2010, 375). Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2010, 224) states that even with respect to Pentecostalism one should use the plural: Pentecostalsisms.



what African Christianity is about. African oral traditions also bear different strains than these churches imply.<sup>26</sup> This study argues that African impacts on the Christian faith, in the particular context of the ELCB, embrace rationality and mysticism in a sense which differs from the mission of the new churches with their emphasis on conversion merely as an individual experience.<sup>27</sup> Thus there is more in African spirituality than the contemporary debate is suggesting. Yet the question arises, what is the resonance of the new churches that are taking root in African soils? This challenge is also taken into account in the particular theological thinking that this study concentrates on.

The Lutheran Church in Botswana is challenged not only by the attractiveness of the new churches and by the problems associated with Christianity's colonial and missionary heritage. Professor James N. Amanze estimates that there are about one thousand different religious societies and Christian churches among the 1.9 million inhabitants of the country, most being very small independent churches.<sup>28</sup> However, Christians make up less than half of the population of Botswana; African traditional religion (ATR) remains as the biggest religion in the country. There are also small minorities of other religions, mainly brought in by immigrant groups.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, witchcraft beliefs and practices are

<sup>26</sup> It is notable that to a great extent, as Oduyoye states, Pentecostal and Charismatic African churches "have returned Africans to the anti-African culture of the Western missionaries" (Oduyoye 1997, 501; also Dube 2010b, 2; cf. the similar critique of the AICs established from 1920–1930 onwards, Adogame & Spickard 2010, 6). This does not mean, however, that the churches do not adapt to the local phenomena. Regarding adapting without losing their basic identity markers, see Anderson 2010, 6; regarding the relationship between local and global, see Adogame & Spickard 2010, vii–ix.

<sup>27</sup> According to Adogame & Spickard (2010, 7), two of the main emphases in contemporary African Pentecostalism are personal conversion experience and manifestation of the spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues.

<sup>28</sup> In 1994, according to Amanze (1994), there were 216 different religious societies in Botswana, some of which were not registered. In 2001 the number of registered religious societies had increased to 523. Yet he concludes in 2006 that there are no less than a thousand religious societies in Botswana including unregistered and registered churches, ecumenical organisations, bible schools and institutions. According to Amanze the basic reason for pluralism can be reduced from the fact that the Church already came to Botswana as divided (Amanze 2006a, 2–3). The population in Botswana for 2010 is app. 1.95 million people (WB 2010, 1).

<sup>29</sup> In 1994 30% of the population were Christians, 0.4% Baha'is, 0.2% Muslims, 0.2% Hindus, 0.01% Buddhists, and 0.01% Sikhs, the rest belonging to the ATR (Amanze 1994, xi). There is also small minority of Jews. However, in 2006 Christianity according to Amanze (2006a, 229) is still the second largest religion in spite of the growth of the AICs. In the history of the Christian Church in Botswana, the missionaries used both British officials and traditional leaders to keep Botswana free from Islamic influence. About the conflict between Christianity and Islam, see Amanze 2006a, 43–47.