

# AFRICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Confronted by vast pockets of abject poverty, rampant disease, ecclesio-political oppression and unhealthy paternalistic domination by the Western church (during and after the Colonial period), the church in Africa—mainly through church-oriented nationalists and nationalist-oriented church leaders — began to create and develop a liberation theology which would express the Christian faith from an African perspective and celebrate what they believe God is doing among them and for them with genuinely African expressions.

The winds of change began to create a serious current following the second world war.<sup>1</sup> However, it was not until the mid-1950's that actual liberation movements, (political, cultural and ecclesiastical), began to produce desired results. Needless to say, most Westerners, mainly missionaries and of course colonialists, opposed and attempted to suppress the spirit of African nationalism. Consequently, Liberation Theology in Africa has been more or less a reflection on the political and ecclesiastical as well as the cultural realms because the oppressive forces dealt a double blow on Africans. As a Christian reflection based on the Scriptures, African theology is being created and interpreted by the African people themselves. Some of us have already begun to enjoy a sense of triumph because we can see some progress.

The church has become more vocal through the All Africa Conference of Churches which was formed during the late 50s<sup>2</sup> when it became apparent that the traditional Christian theology, which the missionaries and some Africans who were trained abroad brought, did not reflect the daily African experience — neither was it intended to. Yet such a theology was portrayed as the orthodox faith! So, Africans were expected to consume it as it was. No effort was made to reflect upon the actual needs of the people beyond worshipping God on set times. This did not really nourish the African soul. It was just a cosmetic symbolized by western clothing, homes, and general life-style. Therefore it was necessary to create a theology that would liberate us from dominant Western theology which did not reflect our faith experience but was imposed upon everyone. Of course we do not expect the Western church to understand African Theology completely, let alone consume it, but one would hope that our sister Western churches would learn something from how the Africans are living out their faith. It is going to require a lot of spiritual

maturity for the missionaries to learn “something” from the so-called “younger churches” in the Third World.

Third World theology in this paper means an umbrella theology that includes a Black theology of liberation,<sup>3</sup> and an African liberation theology, both of which reflect upon the socio-economic, ecclesiastical and political context of the Third World peoples in Africa with special reference to Black Africa.<sup>4</sup> This tendency gives Liberation Theology its character wherever it is being done — a universality based on particularity, which is defined in terms of the black people’s condition and pigmentation. It should be made clear that the condition in which black people find themselves is created by other cultures’ racial attitudes toward people with a dark skin. Consequently blacks react in various ways to that treatment.

Thus Liberation Theology has certain characteristics which may not necessarily apply to all regions but certainly distinguish it from the traditional Euro-American theologies which are generally an abstract reflection upon some metaphysics.<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note that Liberation Theology is the account of how the believers are set free from both Third World oppressive structures inherited from colonialists and some created during the neo-colonial era, and Western theological as well as political domination. The West often creates burdens for the Third World by indifference to our cry for justice, peace and human dignity.

God’s justice does not discriminate between forms of justice but very often courts of law are used to perpetrate injustice in subtle ways in many countries. It almost leads one to the conclusion that unless a sense of justice is “written” on everyone’s heart, the courts of law cannot really “let justice roll down like mighty waters.” The courts cannot make people love one another, and therefore any attempt to exercise justice where there is no love and respect for fellow humanity is often sheer vanity. God says: let justice roll down like mighty waters.<sup>6</sup>

## **2. Characteristics of Third World Theologies**

There are several general characteristics of Third World Liberation Theologies as perceived by various African scholars.<sup>7</sup> Let us highlight a few here: (1) Theological disillusionment. According to Prof. Kwesi Dickson, Liberation Theology developed because the theological status quo in all of Christendom did not address the socio-economic and political realities which the African people experienced. This irrelevance consequently undermined Christ’s work because Africans believe in a God who works in history, one who makes a difference for the better. I concur with all liberation theologians who contend that Christian theology ought to be

experiential; it must address the human condition and reflect upon what God is doing to alleviate it. James Cone was correct when he said liberation is the top priority of Christian theology. Christ came to save! Suffering cannot continue when God in Christ steps into the situation to save the creature!

European and American theologians are rendered inadequate to do Liberation Theology on behalf of the Third World Christians in Black Africa because in most cases black people have been oppressed by the whites — thus the two groups lived on different sides of the railroad tracks, so to speak. Furthermore, Westerners tend to be content with “logic” which they may arrive at in their academic gymnasium, whereas Africans find “logic” in a theology that works because their theology is only good as an instrument with which to arrive at a saving truth. Africans are not merely interested in logic itself as an intellectual exercise.

Of course they may use the same Bible and even worship the same God sometimes in the same sanctuary! But since their experience influences their theological reflection, there is no way these “two communities” can be represented by one theological perspective. True, both share the same faith — Christian theology — but their perspectives are certainly divergent on account of their different social contexts, and presuppositions. So, the disillusionment comes from the deadening irrelevant characteristic of Western theology which seems to be undermining the meaning of our belief in a Christian God who acts for justice and salvation. (2) Function of theology: Some liberation theologians, including Africans in the Third World, argue that theology is not merely an articulation of the faith for purely abstract, spiritual, or mental edification — totally divorced from the rest of the material context we live in. For many liberation theologians, theology spells out the truth — it attempts to articulate what God is saying to, and doing for the despised, the marginalized, the exploited and the oppressed people who believe that only God has made it possible for them to come “this far.”

Most liberation theologians accentuate not only praxis but reflection practice. They even advocate a shift from traditional orthodoxy to revolutionary orthopraxis because faith without works (practice) is not worth the name. But African theologians do not end with praxis as some of my European colleagues alleged.<sup>8</sup> We again reflect on our actions — if necessary we do this until the seventh time when God says: “It is good!” Thus, the function of theology is to reflect upon the mystery of what God is doing until it is clear how we benefit from Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior through whom God acts in history. If the Westerners do not take theology as a serious reflection on how God makes us survive, I can readily appreciate the

mutual disinterest and lack of solidarity between the two parties (African and Western churches). For the African, theology, viewed as the word of God through the mouth of humanity, must be taken very seriously in order that it addresses our concrete temporal situations. Hence, our theological methods may have to differ. (3) Theological methods: Liberation theologians, especially Africans use culture as a tool for the doing of a theology which is relevant to their people. The Scriptures are also used to liberate the oppressed who are often victims of their own culture when culture is used to interpret the word of God. In Latin America liberation theologians use a dialectical Sociology (of a Marxian type) to establish the socio-economic and political realities to which the gospel brings a word of salvation. Among the Bantus, (a section of Africans) culture is the commonest form through which the Gospel may be taught. (4) Tradition: Liberation theology as it is being done in Africa is open-ended. Because God has not finished working among us yet, and because our faith and experiences are not static, there is always room for spiritual growth as well as intellectual development, both of which are by definition dynamic, not static. Liberation theologians have to be selective in what they can draw from the tradition of the Church. For them tradition means those points in the history of the church when the Holy Spirit "broke in" in order to ensure justice, truth and true peace. Examples would be Martin Luther's 95 theses, John Wesley's accidental departure from the tradition of the Anglican Church, Richard and Simon Kimbangu's position which led to the founding of what is now the largest independent church in Africa (Kimbanguism). Such tradition is not racially motivated. Rather the Holy Spirit is the guiding principle.

Thus, Liberation Theology in Africa is not interested in perpetuating norms and creeds, or the limits of the power, justice, and grace of God, but to continue to reflect upon what God is doing on the basis of which new norms and creeds can be established. In fact, it is possible that this is what makes First World theologians restless when they hear the term "Liberation Theology." The term frightens many of them because they want to be in control even if it means not listening to the Holy Spirit.

Now let us just skim through the background, and focus on liberation theological activities in Africa without dealing with any particular topic, such as the Atonement, Salvation, Justice or Incarnation.

### **3. THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE**

#### **(a) Traditional Africa**

We cannot even attempt to mark the beginning of the doing of theology in Africa since some of it has been done orally ever since Africans knew and believed in God the creator,<sup>9</sup> (and this means

long before the missionaries planted Christianity on the continent of Africa; and after the planting of Christianity on the continent). However, we should clarify that African theology which is not based on the Bible is properly designated as African traditional theology because reflection is based on traditional beliefs, general revelation, reason, proverbs, etc.

We may say that African theology began when the first African communities started to reflect upon their experience of what they believed God was doing among them, and for them. This would demonstrate the fact that African knowledge of God is not just a result of a reaction to the West, rather it is a response to God's acts in history as we shall repeatedly make the point. Unfortunately, whenever that was, we do not have it on record at all. Nevertheless we cannot ignore such beginnings just because we do not know when it was, and cannot document it. I suspect Westerners are likely to get "hung up" on documentation because they value that in their scholarly tradition. We Africans have other criteria.

Since much of African wisdom and tradition has been passed down orally, it is customarily safe to assume that, along with other artifacts, customs and beliefs, theological knowledge has also been handed down orally from generation to generation. So, we really cannot say when African traditional theology began on the continent. But one thing is certain: it is a reality and has been since God revealed Himself to the Africans and the people responded in song and prayer.<sup>10</sup> Most Westerners do not want to hear the Africans claim that the God who revealed Himself to traditional Africa is the same Parent of "our Lord Jesus Christ" because they insist that one can only know God through the son Jesus Christ, they also believe that Jesus first appeared in 1 A.D. Which is clearly erroneous in the light of the African knowledge of the living God, the creator, who is also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as portrayed in both the Old and New Testaments.

According to Justin the Martyr's Christology, for instance, "It is the Logos who forms the universe, who 'appears' to Abraham and Moses, and who confers knowledge of God on all humanity by giving people a share in God's rational nature. It becomes understandable, therefore, that it is the Logos who, in the person of Jesus, becomes incarnate to overcome the forces of demonic unreason and to open the way to a new life for humanity." (The Christological Controversy, Richard Norris, p. 7.) Although Justin did not develop a complete Christology, what he argues is sufficient for us to make the point that since Africans knew God before the church, and since knowledge of God is made possible primarily through Jesus, it therefore makes sense to contend that the pre-existent Christ

revealed God to the Africans. Consequently Africans may legitimately refer to God the Parent of "our Lord Jesus Christ."

### **(b) Christian Tradition in Africa.**

In an academic setting, we are expected to attempt to explore the formal beginning of African Christian" theology within literary circles, and document any volumes, authors, and conferences dealing with the subject. For instance, in *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Muzorewa, 1985), my research dealt with studying and establishing the "origins" as well as the "sources" of African theology as it is now done by African Christians. I cite five sources that mark the beginning of written Christian theology on the continent. 1 . The A.A.C.C.: I cited the first assembly of the All Africa Conference of Churches (A.A.C.C.) held in 1958, as having laid a foundation on which African scholars formally began to do African theology in a literary sense. Apart from some articles on the subject, noteworthy is the book co-edited by Kwesi Dickson of Ghana and Paul Ellingworth entitled *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (1969). This seems to mark the beginning of serious attempts at the creation of a written African Theology. In this book, theology is not expressed as liberative at all, possibly because the people who contributed articles probably sought to conform to the academic status quo at the time. Instead the book attempts to include traditional concepts which are evidently dominant in African churches. Nevertheless to take that first step to write a book on theology was daring. It took liberated persons to attempt such a task.

2. The N.A.A.C.P.: The Conference of Black Churchmen which was held in Tanzania (Aug. 22-28, 1971), sponsored by the African Commission of the National Committee of the Black Churchmen in the U.S., and the Tanzania Consultative Council, also contributes to the literary beginning of African Theology intentionally done by Black people themselves. It is important to note their theme: "Black identity and solidarity and the role of the church as a medium for social change." Needless to say, the terms "identity" and "solidarity" sound a high note of black consciousness and the spirit of liberation.

Many sources agree that black consciousness movement in South Africa and the Civil Rights movement in the United States greatly influenced the rise of Black Theology in both regions. The black Americans had experienced oppression and segregation on the basis of their skin colour. So had the colonized Africans. Therefore "liberation" became a common theme and concern. This set the tone for political liberation in Africa since black people everywhere were victims of white racism. These themes had been reflected upon earlier than 1919 when the first Pan-African Congress was held in Paris, under the auspices of the National Association for the

Advancement of Coloured People (N.A.A.C.P.) Attention must be drawn to the appeal to racial equality or human equality and social justice, which characterized these congresses. The church had also preached spiritual liberation (from sin), and that all human beings are equal in God's eyes. The Black people sought to live out what they believed and preached. (There was a series of these Pan-African congresses — about 6 of them!) Thus, from the very beginning, the spirit of African liberation has emerged from, and united black people who have found themselves in slavery, colonial and racist situations. They were spontaneously united by the similarity of their plight, not just by their racial identity. However, their plight was common due to their race. Today, Third World theologians share a common plight on the basis of their oppressed condition everywhere. 3. The author also cites the 1972 theological consultation held at Makerere University (in Uganda) January 1 to 7. The theme was "Theological consultation on African theology and church life." According to one of the major African theologians, E. E. Mshana, the major purpose of this consultation was to legitimate, justify and define African theology." Yes, it needed to be justified because the Western dominant theological voice would not recognize other voices. Neither does it acknowledge other cultural expressions of the faith!

These activities among others, formally brought theological studies into an academic environment. In fact, since the 1972 consultation which was held at Makerere University, Uganda, there have been many African Universities which actually established the Department of Religious studies and theological education by extension. But the church was still dominated by missionaries and their imported Western theology. Black leadership was scanty, and suppressed,

4. The E.A.T.W.O.T.: The author cites the Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians (EATWOT) which first met in Dar es Salaam in 1976, as also marking the official beginnings of written African Theology, done in dialogue with other Third World peoples who also share the same plight with the Africans. A book edited by Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella. *The Emergent Gospel* (1978) was a result of this event. But it was the 1977 theological consultation held in Accra, Ghana, sponsored by the EATWOT, which actually used the term and focused on "African Theology." The substance of this consultation resulted in the publication of a book: *African Theology en route* (1979) co-edited by Kofi Appiah-Kubi of Ghana and Sergio Torres of Chile, Latin America.

This conference was my first international exposure to such theological conferences. I was then in graduate school at Union

Theological Seminary, New York. Prof. James H. Cone, my doctoral supervisor inspired me very much with his commitment to the liberation of black people everywhere. I represented Zimbabwe when it was at the peak of its liberation struggle against the Ian Smith colonial regime. Because of my socio-political context then, I decided that it was appropriate to designate African Theology as a "liberation theology." However, other African theologians tend to designate the term "liberation" for Black Theology in North America and South Africa only.

Setiloane's African Theology (1986) calls for caution when answering the question: "Is African Theology a Theology of Liberation?" Setiloane argues that "The Liberation, African theology strives for, is that of the very 'soul of Africa' from the imprisonment in the vaults of Western conceptualism and discourse, from cerebration and pseudo scientific-ness to human-ness, Botho, Ubuntu, authenticity born out of a living practical experience of Modimo, Qamata, Lesa, Uvelinqangi is the totality of life."<sup>12</sup> (African Theology. 1986, p. 45.) If by saying this Setiloane is indicating that liberation is far more than political we cannot agree with him more. But in South Africa, we demand political liberation first. Furthermore, liberation is not only from colonial oppressors but from any political structures that are oppressive! It is only the free or the oppressors who do not appreciate the need for "liberation," (The healthy has no need of a physician!) Liberation applies wherever people are subjected to dehumanizing conditions, even by fellow blacks.

5. Individual authors. There are books by individuals who have taken it upon themselves to do theology mainly at a regional level. This gives African Theology a particularity and authenticity that justifies its universality because it speaks to several African regions. For instance, although he is an expatriate, following extensive research Aylward Shorter has written African Christian Theology (1977); Farewell to Innocence (1977) was written by a South African church leader Allan Boesak; Toward an African Theology (1979) was written by a Ghanaian Professor of theology John S. Pobee; Kwesi Dickson of Ghana, a biblical scholar has authored Theology in Africa (1984); The Origins and Development of African Theology (1985) was written by a Systematician Zimbabwean, G. H. Muzorewa; Mercy Amba Oduyoye professor of theology in Nigeria has also written Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa (1986) to mention a few. Every year new books on the subject appear. John Mbiti wrote several books on African traditional religion which is an important source of African Theology. His New Testament Eschatology in an African background (1972) is sufficiently biblical. Then there are numerous articles on African Theology, or at least bearing the title "African Theology." Most of these only make a case for African Theology without doing it because the emphasis



has been more “apologetic” than “theologising”. Be that as it may, all these may be regarded today as some of our sources of African Theology — though some are more liberative than others. However, we cannot just lump them together because there are certain trends.

Admittedly we have not developed distinct schools of thought beyond: liberation, cultural, and both. In this essay, I am combining the liberation character and culture character to construct “an African Liberation Theology.” We maintain that theology must be liberative in order to speak to people who are looking up to God to intervene on their behalf, in order to redeem them from the evil of oppression. In my opinion, the two major sources of oppression are politics, civilization or culture.

#### **4. TRENDS IN AFRICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

Some of us initially agree with Professor John Mbiti, one of Africa’s theological giants, when he admits that “The theme of liberation has become very popular among African theologians, especially in Southern Africa and in the All Africa Conference of Churches.”<sup>13</sup> But many more would differ very much with Mbiti when he alleges that although liberation theology is popular it is hardly biblically based. He says “This neglect in Africa of the biblical backing of the theology of liberation is a very alarming omission that calls urgently for correction; otherwise that branch of African Theology will lose its credibility.”<sup>14</sup> It is apparent to this author that Mbiti’s opposition against the term “liberation” is a reflection of his tendency to conform to Western theologians who tend to be negative to the theme of liberation. His allegation that African theology is not biblical is unfounded because most of us do theology which is based on the Christian faith which is biblical although we are not biblical scholars. We are preachers!

For instance, Fashole-Luke of Sierra Leone is in agreement with many African theologians when he says, “There is no Christian theologian in Africa who denies the fact that the Bible is a primary and basic source for any Christian theology.”<sup>15</sup> We are also in harmony with Appiah-Kubi, another African theologian, who adds to what Fashole-Luke says when he asserts that “Biblical teachings are being combined with, and compared with, African traditional religious concepts.”<sup>16</sup> We have to say Mbiti grossly underestimated the extensive use of the Bible in African preaching and politics. The point is, liberation theology has become very popular because there are obvious reasons for the need for liberation and the Bible tells us that God is concerned about our liberation (Luke 4:18, 19; Exodus 3:7- 10; Amos 5:21 -24) There may be various views on what theological method must be employed to deal with the problems most effectively, but there cannot be any doubt that liberation which,

according to James Cone, is the core of the Christian mission is Biblical and is needed in aspects of life including: political, social, theological and economic liberation. There are two major expressions of theology in Africa today: 1. Africanization (culture: within the present African situation) and 2. liberation (politics) We shall now spend the rest of our time and space discussing these expressions as they characterize African Theology.

But just before we do that, it is necessary to state that, with the exception of African traditional theology which refers to theological reflection on traditional religious beliefs uninformed by the Scriptures but by other sources such as general revelation, reason, culture and proverbs, there cannot be any talk of an African liberation theology apart from the Scriptures. The Scriptures inform both a liberation perspective and Africanization. These two are inseparable because the African believer is liberated in order that he or she may be free to maintain humanizing values, and pursue goals of one's choice, influenced by the Word of God. African theology of liberation is based on such scriptures as Luke 4:1 8-20, Exodus 3:1f and other passages as we pointed out earlier. It is however, different from Western theology because it employs a unique hermeneutic which is informed by African presuppositions for the most part. Also it is not formulated in the context of Western philosophical categories. Differences in hermeneutics, epistemology and philosophical values do not necessarily render a theology Christian or non-Christian, or orthodox or non-orthodox. Rather, it is the content which makes a theology Christian. We pointed out earlier that African Theology is liberative when it uses the gospel truth to free us from any dehumanizing aspects of culture which are obviously oppressive and destructive. We use cultural humanizing values to liberate ourselves from an oppressive colonial mentality without rejecting Western technology which we can utilize to enhance our humanity. We can even use our culture to facilitate the planting of the gospel message within us without converting the Word of God into a political ideology. Most of us are aware that the truth we arrive at by the use of secular analytic tools (such as culture, philosophy, and so on) is not synonymous with the gospel truth. The former can only be informative but the latter is not only informative but salvific as well.

#### **4.1 AFRICANIZATION**

The one major difference between the emphasis on Liberation Theology both in Black America and South Africa, and Liberation Theology in the remainder of Africa South of the Sahara, is that the former primarily focuses on socio-economic-political liberation while the latter focuses first and foremost on cultural liberation.<sup>17</sup> The bottom line is, because we believe that Jesus Christ is the liberator,

African communities that confess Christ as Lord, are constantly going through a definite form of liberative transformation. While some African theologians think that Black theology and African theology do not have anything in common, there are others who believe that Black Theology and African Theology are not “antagonists” but “soulmates.”<sup>18</sup> Desmond Tutu is a good example. Manas Buthelezi, another prominent black theologian in South Africa, shares this view. Black theologies in North America and South Africa share mutual concern with respect to the socio-economic-political liberation of the blacks everywhere. However, this is not to be perceived as something exclusive of cultural liberation. Setiloane is correct to note that “African theology and Black theology are ‘stable mates,’ each with its peculiar contribution to the Struggle.”<sup>19</sup> In saying this, Setiloane embraces what Desmond Tutu had said. It seems to me that there is wisdom in understanding how black liberation theology (recognizing its full identity and agenda) is “a branch” of African theology, as John Mbiti said.

We agree with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, author of *Hearing and Knowing* (1986), that: “In Africa, . . . it is the experience of liberation from colonialism and the cry for this liberation that have stimulated theologies that struggle to be relevant to the realities of Africa,<sup>20</sup> There is also an unquestionable truth in what Oduyoye says that there is a struggle for liberation even in independent states “as the nations struggle to be fully liberated from colonialism and from their internal misgoverning of themselves.”<sup>21</sup> Turning from colonialism to African culture, Oduyoye remarks that “the traditional ordering of society placed its own burdens on the African people.”<sup>22</sup>

Apparently, Oduyoye belongs to the school of thought that understands African Theology as a theology of cultural liberation that can set us free from our cultural limitations and bondage. Liberation from a colonial mentality, and African cultural mentality including a narrow African world-view which would blind us, or hinder the opening of new horizons, is needed in order to create more humanizing socio-economic and political conditions. The new African must emerge from the old because modern technology and the Christian faith necessarily transform our life. This is why we can characterize African Theology as a liberation theology.

Technology can be used to liberate the Africans, or to oppress them, depending on the intention of those who employ it. The same is true of Christianity. Therefore, it is crucial that Africans play a major part in making political and theological decisions that affect their humanity and destiny. So Africanization has positive qualities which enhance African values. However, any aspects of Africanization that do not reflect the dynamic character of the culture must be discouraged.

Kwesi Dickson of Ghana makes an important, though general statement on Third World theologising: "since the 'Third World' has suffered much from exploitation and and domination at the hands of colonialists, liberation theology sees this domination as the key element in 'Third World' theologising."<sup>23</sup> In the foregoing statement, Dickson is sympathetic with the goals of Liberation Theology, namely to create awareness of the need for persons to have dignity,<sup>24</sup> and provide the means through which that can be accomplished. He correctly understands that African liberation theology "proceeds on the basis of the conviction that faith divorced from practice is not worth the name of faith." Indeed, one can also add that a faith that does not address our pressing needs is mere window dressing and Africans do not need it. A relevant theology is one that arises from a people's social context.

Buthelezi contends that Black Liberation Theology in South Africa must begin where the people are today, and seek redemption in Christ from that point. The black people in South Africa are under the yoke of oppression and at the mercy of unjust government authorities. Political oppression is the social context in South Africa. Liberation Theology says what God is doing for God's beloved who cry to the divine by day and by night. Obviously it is those who are crying who can readily hear what God is saying in response to their need, and they can readily see what God is doing in their situation of oppression. Consequently, the World must listen to what the black people in South Africa are announcing that the voice of God is decreeing, namely: Let my people be free in their own land! The truth of the matter is that, it is not that the oppressors do not hear what God is saying. They just choose to ignore the voice of God; they choose to ignore God's will because in this case God's will does not happen to coincide with the will of the white racist oppressors.

For Buthelezi, African theology is not merely matching the received Christian teaching and African life and thought with complete justification. We agree with Buthelezi that Western theology is not to be regarded as "the given" or "the norm" for all theological soundness because our social contexts are different. What was "a given" for Western theology does not necessarily become "our given." "Norms" are also contextual. I believe that the most desirous "norm" for Christian theology is one: truth. Unfortunately, there are many theologians who argue that "truth" is relative! Because Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life," he is received as liberating truth by those who are oppressed, and such liberating truth is not relative. Jesus is the good news. He is the saviour, and consequently the Life.

Since our world is shrinking into a global village, both Western and African theologies may need to establish common criteria for theological soundness if there is need for additional shared norms. Without that, no one theology may claim to be itself the norm for soundness for the others. Along with rejecting Western theological arrogance as basis for doing theology in Africa, Buthelezi also rejects African cultural euphoria as a criterion (understood as the good old days) in doing theology and deciding on what is sound theology because, he argues, we must deal with the present African reality in the here and now. Buthelezi is correct to argue that yesterday's pleasure cannot solve today's misery. However, Buthelezi must be interpreted and understood in the context of the apartheid South Africa where the government claims that forcing Africans to live in Bantustans is in keeping with African traditional standards. I do not believe that he condemns his own culture. He just cautions us to the danger of being taken advantage of in the guise of "doing us a favour. An African cannot afford to completely disown his or her own culture.

Understood otherwise, it would be almost impossible to relate Black Liberation Theology and African Liberation Theology whose basic premise is that African culture is the context within which we can intelligibly do African Liberation Theology in the light of our twentieth century socio-political realities. Buthelezi rejects the African religio-cultural tradition as a valid vehicle in the doing of a Theology of Liberation in Africa. More suitable tools have to be employed in order to deal with Africa's present realities.

Other African theologians hold different views from Buthelezi. I am among those who believe that African liberation theology must develop within the framework of the African reality which invariably includes the past, present and future. I fail to understand how any serious African theologian can attempt to isolate the "present realities" from Africa's history and future. Developed in a holistic framework (past, present and future), African Liberation Theology becomes meaningful to the people of Africa. Dickson's judgement on whether or not African Theology is a liberation theology is separatist: African theologians from outside South Africa have tended to keep socio-economic and political matters out of all discussion of theology.'<sup>25</sup> The question Dickson must face is: How realistic is this sort of theologizing which excludes vital dimensions of African daily living? One would take Dickson's position only if one either assumes that the independent nations are not experiencing incidents of political oppression to which liberation theology must speak, or one is not in a position to acknowledge and admit the sad fact that there are Africans who are oppressed by fellow Africans! That there are African refugees all over the world is a sign

political oppression at home! A more down-to-earth theologian, Oduyoye, has told us that some independent nations need liberation theology to speak for the oppressed of the land who cannot "sing the Lord's song in their own land." Surely the numbers of African refugees throughout the world ought to be indicative of the continued need for political liberation on the so-called free continent

However, Dickson is correct to caution that we cannot impose a theological perspective on anyone, but he would be wrong to pretend that there is no need for a liberation theology among Africans outside South Africa, because political oppression is rampant on the continent and Dickson would be aware of it.

Another unplausible conclusion Dickson makes is that most of African nations are no longer ruled by white oppressors or colonialists, therefore the question of political liberation is out, except for the white-ruled South Africa and Namibia. In spite of these views held by Dickson, which are not necessarily shared by many, most African theologians agree that there is need to reflect on what God is doing to liberate African people today cross-culturally and transcontinentally. They agree that there are multiple facets of the struggle to be free in Africa.

It seems Dickson believes that political liberation only relates to black and white situations. Such is not the case. We do not agree with Dickson's assumptions because the last two decades have shown us that even in African independent states, there is need for socio-political and economic liberation without which both the neo-colonial oppressors and their political victims will sink below human standards in their own land. The presence of thousands upon thousands of African refugees in various nations today does not send a positive message to Africa's former oppressors or Africa's well-wishers. Without mentioning any particular nations because the degree varies, it suffices to note that these African refugees in African countries and abroad certainly indicate the political strife, not for independence from white rulers this time, but for freedom from a limited world view, nepotism, tribalism, undesirable and oppressive political ideologies which are forced upon the people.

Maybe this is what leads some black South African theologians to reject culture as a basis for a Liberation Theology because culture here is used to oppress and justify the creation of the Bantustans rather than to liberate.

Much of the oppression in independent Africa today is due to certain Africanisms, for example tribalism and a certain mentality developed during the struggle for independence. Women are oppressed by

their husbands because in most regions there is a culture-based male domination. Jesus Christ though a Jew, did not discriminate against women but most churches today for instance, despise women who claim to have been called to the ordained ministry. This attitude comes partly from our African culture that indoctrinates the woman to be inferior to the man, and partly from the Jewish (biblical) attitude against women. So, what does it mean to say the church is the body of Christ yet we do not obey or learn from Jesus Christ the teacher, example and revelation of God's will? Apparently we tend to allow our cultures to give direction to our christian doctrine, in so doing we often "derail" the gospel. On this note, I have to say the church needs to liberate itself from cultural forces, and be in service of Jesus Christ of whom the church is the body.. The Church is called not to conform to this world but, to transform it. But what we often observe is that the church seeks to conform to secular structures, especially oppressive ones, for example the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa has even developed a theology to undergird the evil apartheid social system.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4.2 LIBERATION**

At first, it would appear that any talk about liberation theology should be limited to South Africa (as Kwesi Dickson would suggest), where a few minority foreigners are in control of all political and economic power. Also, initially, it would seem as if Black Liberation Theology has little or nothing to do with culture (as Mans Buthelezi argues), and is totally preoccupied with politics. But that is really not the case. Neither extreme is realistic. Here is what one of the major voices in black theology has said about the situation in South Africa.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu believes that liberation is a major aspect of theology who belongs to the "umbrella theology" known as African Theology. But for Tutu, African Liberation theology is actually a theodicy, except that in the South African situation the theodiceal question is not just philosophical, i.e. why is there suffering in the world? Rather, it is existential: why are we suffering like this at the hands of fellow human beings who just happen to be white.

I agree with Tutu's contention that it is from a suffering, oppressed and exploited people that all liberation theology originates. This explains why free and or oppressive nations cannot understand or even just appreciate the concerns of liberation theology. The lack the experience which would enable them to comprehend the matter. Tutu locates the genesis of all liberation theology (or Black theology of liberation) at the point of abject suffering of the black people of South Africa. He believes that black South Africans have been so dehumanised that most of them have almost come to believe that

they deserve the treatment they are forced to receive from the white racists in South Africa because of their black skin. Here racism is at its worst.

Black Theology in South Africa has to some extent become an expression of and reflection upon the black consciousness movement, whose philosophy aims at sensitising all black people of their intrinsic human worth endowed in them by God who created them black in God's own image. It is simply not true that black people were created to be inferior and to serve the whites. This is a myth that some people have created in order to justify their sin of dehumanising people created in God's image like themselves — if there is any trace of the divine image in them anymore!

Many theologians in South Africa would agree with Tutu that a black theology of liberation in South Africa was partly inspired by its counterpart in North America although the social contexts in respective regions are not the same. All black liberation theologians share Tutu's view that liberation theology takes the socio-political dimension of reality very seriously. It seeks to make sense out of the suffering of the blacks in relation to what God has done, is doing and will do. It teaches the doctrine of God that describes the type of God that Christians worship.

Because Black Theology as a liberation theology is very relevant to a particular situation, it is bound to shift its agenda as the socio-political situation changes. Therefore liberation theology cannot and does not lay claim to universal application because, God's answer for one community does not apply to another although God remains faithful and compassionate to the suffering of the world. The point of consistence is that God answers our prayers, i. e. God intervenes in our respective conditions of need in order to provide us with a humanising spirit. This is why Tutu says: Theology is temporal, the Gospel is eternal.<sup>27</sup>

## **5. CONCLUSION**

We cannot overemphasise the truism that our understanding of the Gospel is influenced by our social context. However it is true that, because the Gospel is God's Word, it is alive when what it says speaks to our situation, and it is also alive in spite of our lack of response. Therefore, for an oppressed people it is good news to hear that God is a liberator, that God has heard the suffering of the least of these and has come down to help alleviate the pain and the burden. Also they need to hear that God is on their side because they need to get redeemed from their plight, not because they are necessarily more virtuous or better than others. God saves a



people from a dehumanising condition to a life-giving situation, for a creative and productive purpose. Consequently most exponents of liberation theology strive to be obedient and faithful to Christ the liberator because in Him they have life, freedom and truth.

Black Theology of liberation teaches that God has power, and that God hears (cares about) the cries of the oppressed, the poor, the destitute, and takes positive action to deliver them from evil and death. Consequently, there is hope for a brighter future because a compassionate God intervenes into the situation in order to bring justice and freedom to all.

Further more it challenges its adherents to love their enemies as themselves as Jesus Christ would. It challenges the oppressed not to destroy themselves by self-hate, self-pity and a sense of worthlessness. Instead the oppressed are called upon already as victors, not only to forgive and be reconciled but to love as they participate in the divine economy of salvation, where God is sovereign. Third World Theologies in general, and African Liberation Theology in particular is not just one more academic fad, neither is it a theological souvenir. It is the word of God being expressed through the humblest and most despised stock of the human race. Woe unto those who hear it but do not harken, see what God is doing but cannot perceive it. Blessed are the hearers and doers of the word.

## **REFERENCES**

1. It appears that Pan-Africanism took shape permanently following the First and second World Wars. Black Americans and Africans who had been recruited by the Americans and the British fought side by side and lived in the same quarters with the whites. They saw whites bleed blood like their own and concluded that race is only skin deep. Humanity is basically equal-rather, there is no such thing as superior people and inferior races. Moreover the British and the Americans had fought for their national independence, while they (the British) colonised much of Africa. See *The Origins and Development of African Theology*, (1985), Muzorewa, 46-48.
2. The All Africa Conference of Churches was organised and sponsored by the Christian Council of Churches in Nigeria, with some financial help from the International Missionary Council. The first organisational meeting was held in Ibadan in 1958. Two thirds of the delegates were blackAfrican because the intention was to organise a movement that was led by African christians themselves. (See my discussion, Muzorewa 1985, 57-74).
3. According to Basil Moore, the term "Black Theology" spilled over from the United States, but the content of Black Theology in South Africa is unique for that situation. (See Basil Moore's chapter 1: What is Black Theology? in *The Challenge of Black Theology in South*

Africa, 1973,1)

4. We generally divide the continent into two halves — the North which is mainly Arabic and Africa south of the Sahara which is mainly black. However the Organisation of African Unity has other ways of dividing the continent. They simply go by which regions of Africa are self-governing and which are still governed by foreign powers, e.g. South Africa which is still not a member.

5. I personally cannot understand why the majority of Western scholars spent literally centuries arguing over whether or not God exists. The whole development of the proofs of the existence of God demonstrates that the Westerner's way of belief is different from that of the African. A similar debate has been going on since the first century with regard to the person and nature of Jesus Christ.

6. Amos 5:21-24.

7. Prof. Kwesi Dickson of Ghana is one of the top African Old Testament scholars whose writings are widely read because he does creative work.

8. My European colleague at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary argues that the limitation of Liberation Theology lies in its reactionary character. They also argue that it is also not reflective and inclusive. It is unchristian because it says "all for me, and nothing for the oppressor. This is of course not true.

9. If by theology we refer to a reflection on what God is doing, without reference to the christian experience or the Bible, there is a sense in which the beginning of African Theology cannot be established because it is undocumented and those who did theology way back before Christianity was planted in Africa are long gone, of course. In *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (1985), I discuss the origin of the term "African Theology" in chapter 6.

10. Mbiti J.S. has published a whole book on *The Prayers of African Religion*, (1975). Some of the prayers recorded there could easily be mistaken for christian prayers because the Africans worship the same God in traditional life and the church.

11. Mshana E.E. discusses this in his article, "The Challenge of Black Theology and African Theology" in *Africa Theological Journal* 5 (Dec.1972): 19-30.

12. Setiloane G.M. 1986, *African Theology: An Introduction*, Johannesburg, Skotaville.

13. Appiah-Kubi, K and Torres S (eds) 1979 :*African Theology en route* Maryknoll, Orbis.

14. Ibid., p 89

15. Fashole-Luke E.W. 1975 p 263

16. Appiah-Kubi K and Torres S 1979 p 88

17. Cone J 1986 *My Soul Looks Back* p 108

18. Tutu D *Black Theology/African Theology: Soulmates or Antagonists?* in *Journal of Religious Thought* 33 (Fall Winter) p 25-33

19. Setiloane G 1986 p 43

20. Oduyoye M A 1986 Hearing and Knowing p 80f
21. Ibid., p81
22. Ibid., p81
23. Dickson K.1985 Theology in Africa p 125