



EDITORIAL

In memory of those who went before, in honor of those who follow behind

Introducing African Christian Theology

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Describing the shift of World Christianity from the Global North to the Global South, Mark Noll posited that “as much as the new shape of Christianity in the world affects general world history, much more does it influence matters of Christian belief and practice.”¹ Given global Christianity’s shift to the South, Christian beliefs and practices in recent decades have not been driven by Western Christian theology. Nearly thirty years ago, western scholars recognized that the majority of Christians on the face of the earth are found in Africa, Asia, and Latin America — and that “the proportion . . . grows annually.”² Therefore, in retrospect and prospect, global Christianity is increasingly envisioned to be highly influenced by non-Western Christian theologies. For example, diaspora missiologists are consistently reminding us that the global church is thriving because of the movement of Africans across the world.³ Africans migrating to North America and Europe are planting churches in areas where traditional Christianity has been declining.

It is, therefore, important to closely study and understand the African Christian theologies that are shaping world Christianity in a new way. African Christianity is not just shaping Christian belief (theology), but also practice (praxis). For example, what are the parameters of salvation? That is, is salvation only a matter for individuals, or is salvation also for larger groups? How does the world of spirits influence people’s daily lives? How should believers read the Bible? These and many other questions have implications for church growth and movement in foreign lands. In retrospect and prospect, God’s people are on the

¹ Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*, 33.

² Andrew F. Walls, “Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect,” 85. This chapter was first presented as a lecture for an African Theological Fellowship forum in Accra, Ghana, in 1997.

³ E.g., see the work of Afe Adogame, Jehu J. Hanciles, and Harvey Kwiyani.

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move around the world, and, as they move, they make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19–20).

In June 2021, David Tarus, the executive director of ACTEA, began a conversation with me (Joshua) that ultimately led to the founding of this journal, *African Christian Theology*. David was captured by Byang Kato’s vision to establish a theological journal that would serve the needs of African Christianity. I am passionate about resourcing church leaders on the continent. Many fine existing journals are limited in scope, inaccessible (as they exist only in print format or are behind paywalls too expensive for most in Africa), or effectively have a regional rather than a pan-African focus. We are thus launching this journal not in competition with other journals, but to supplement them and to provide new opportunities for scholars and practitioners to produce knowledge and to engage in debate and conversation. It responds to “the need for African Christians to make sense of or to grow in understanding of the Christian faith that they have inherited as Africans, a faith that they share with many other people around the world.”⁴

The editors have committed evangelical perspectives, as this is ACTEA’s periodical, but the journal is broader in scope, ecumenical, and welcomes articles from scholars from across the Christian tradition — Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, AICs. *African Christian Theology* exists to serve the whole of Africa, providing a venue for conversations between different regions of Africa. We strive to follow in the footsteps of faithful Christian ancestors. These include the early Egyptian theologians — such as Origen, Clement, Athanasius, and Didymus the Blind, along with Antony and Pakhom (or Pachomius), the founders of Christian monasticism, who laid the foundations of orthodoxy across the world, within the Greek, Coptic, Syriac, Latin, and Ethiopic traditions. These also include the early North African theologians — such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine — who lay the foundations for Latin theology and thus for all Western articulations of Western articulations of the Christian Faith. We also recall — though most have forgotten — the thousand-year history of indigenous and vernacular African Christianity in ancient and medieval Nubia (Sudan and much of South Sudan), the presence of Christian communities in the Mali Empire (now Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, and parts of Niger and Burkina Faso) during the reign of Mansa Musa (r. c. 1312 – c. 1337), and the rich theologizing of the sixth century Yared the Melodist of Aksum (Eritrea and northern Ethiopia).

We also follow in the footsteps of those who have more recently joined the ancestral cloud of witnesses. These legends of African Christianity have completed their races, but their theological thinking has continued to impact

⁴ Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African: Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations*, 9.

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the present of African Christianity. They include Cameroonian Jean-Marc Éla; Central African Isaac Zokoué; Congolese Kā Mana and Vincent Mulago; Gambian Lamin Sanneh; Ghanaians Kwame Bediako, Kwesi Dickson, Afua Kuma, and John S. Pobee; Kenyans John G. Gatū and John S. Mbiti; Nigerians David Tuesday Adamo, Ogbu U. Kalu, and Byang Kato; Sierra Leoneans Edward W. Fasholé-Luke and Harry Sawyerr; Tanzanian Charles Nyamiti; American Thomas C. Oden; and Scotsman Andrew F. Walls. Together these theologians promoted World Christianity perspectives through deep engagement with African contextual realities. Of course Euro-American contextual theologies have something to offer to us here in Africa — but they should *not* be considered normative. African contextual theologies have just as much to offer to the rest of the world. With Mercy Amba Oduyoye, we recognize that “a bird with one wing cannot fly and that the foot that stays to crush another cannot move either.”⁵ Because *birds have two wings and feet that crush others remain immobile*, the pages of *African Christian Theology* welcome the voices of women. African Christians must produce a theology which bears “the distinctive stamp of mature African thinking and reflection,”⁶ and this theology must be informed by the perspectives of both men and women.

This issue is themed “African Christian Theology: Retrospect and Prospect.” As we look ahead to where we are going, it is fitting to look back to see where we have come from. This theme is deliberately coordinated with the theme of ACTEA’s General Assembly in September 2023, “African Theological Education: Retrospect and Prospect.” The issue opens with a Prologue from Professor Jesse Mugambi, observing that in the past, Euro-American missionaries expected African converts to abandon “primitive” African culture and to culturally mimic the missionaries’ provides a demonstration that missionaries often replaced the concept of *conversion* with the practice of *proselytization*. Next we offer revised versions of two of the keynote addresses from the General Assembly: Jehu J. Hanciles provides “An Anglophone Perspective” and Yacouba Sanon “A Francophone Perspective on the consultation’s theme.

Next we turn to assessments of the legacies of three key African theologians. Dieudonné Djoubairou, a former student of Isaac Zokoué (1944–2014), explores the theological heritage and contribution of his teacher in an article written in French. Aiah Foday-Khabenje explores “The Evangelical Legacy of Byang H. Kato” (1936–1975), whose vision as the General Secretary of the Association of African Evangelicals led to the founding of ACTEA. Joel A. Carpenter explores the theological entrepreneurship of Kwame Bediako (1945–

⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 122, alluding to the widespread African proverb.

⁶ Edward W. Fasholé-Luke, “The Quest for African Christian Theologies,” 173.

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2008). After those three examinations of theological educators, Stephanie A. Lowery's article turns to a churchman and examines the radical ecclesiology of Archbishop David Gitari (1937–2013), who led the Anglican Church of Kenya from 1997–2002, often at odds with both political and ecclesial power structures. The article section of the issue closes with Mercy Amba Oduyoye's reflection of "The Future of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa." We also feature seven book review essays in English and one in French together with three shorter 'book note' book reviews (two in English and one in French). We regret the lack of articles in Portuguese — for reasons beyond our control, articles planned in that language for this issue were postponed.

Our journey to publication of this first issue has been a long journey, only made possible through the practice of *harambee*, many hands pulling together.⁷ In addition to each of our board members, reviewers, contributors to this issue, and each other, the editors extend our hearty thanks to the following:

David Tarus, without whose vision this journal would not have become possible. Zabusu Diakumbi Mbunzu, ACTEA's Francophone Administrator, Steve Hardy, and Tobias Houston assisted with checking Portuguese translations. Titus Batson and Mesfin Teshome provided crucial technological support. During the long journey between conception and publication of this inaugural issue, several editors of other journals freely offered their guidance and aid, and we thank each one: Nelson Jennings, editor of *Global Missiology*; Elias Bongmba, then editor of *Journal of Religion in Africa*; Todd Scaewater, editor of *Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion*; Lukwikilu Credo Mangayi, editor of *Missionalia*; Jeff Miller, then editor of *Priscilla Papers*; Sara Fretheim, then assistant editor of *Mission Studies*; and Felix Wilfred, chief-editor of *International Journal of Asian Christianity*. Similar aid was provided by Knut Holter, the editor of two Peter Lang series, Bible and Theology in Africa and Religion and Society in Africa.

Finally, we thank you, our reader, who are to be counted among "those who follow behind." We close with the blessing with which Harry Sawyerr (1909–1986) concluded *Creative Evangelism*: "May the Church in Africa be the vehicle of abundant life for all Africans."⁸

*Tolle lege.*⁹

⁷ *Harambee*, Kenya's national motto, is a kiSwahili term meaning "let's all pull together!"

⁸ Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa*, 158.

⁹ According to his *Confessions*, in 386 Augustine of Hippo heard the singsong voice of a child nearby chanting *Tolle lege, tolle lege* (Latin: "Take and read, take and read"; *tolle*

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can also be translated ‘take up’). Augustine picked up a copy of Paul’s Letter to the Romans which happened to be nearby and began to read. This marked the beginning of his conversion to the Christ. He relates this in *Confessionum libri XIII* 8.29.

¹⁰ First published in *The Journal of African Christian Thought* 1, no. 1 (1998): 2–16.