

January 27, 2012

Oberseminar: Theologiegeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts (Teil2)

Text: *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*; edited by Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang. In: *Religion and Society* 32; 1993; Berlin. Pages 135-143 [*African theology revisited* by John S. Pobee] and 367-388 [*John Mbiti's contribution to African theology* by Kwame Bediako].

Paper done by: Mona Lisa P. Siacor, for the Oberseminar under Prof. Hans Schwarz, University of Regensburg.

John Samuel Mbiti (b. 30.Nov.1931; Mulango, Kitui, Kenya); theologian; philosopher; the father of contemporary African theology; the son of Samuel Mutuvi Ngaangi and Vesi Mbandi Mutuvi of the Akamba people; married to Verena Mbiti-Siegenthaler, and they have four children. Mbiti is a canon of the Anglican Church of Kenya, an Emeritus professor at the University of Bern, and though retired from fulltime work (served 1981-1996; Reformed Church of the Canton of Bern) still continues to be a parish minister to the town of Burgdorf, Bern, Switzerland. He was educated in Kenya, Uganda, the United States, and England where he obtained his doctorate in New Testament studies in 1963.

He taught at the universities of Makerere [Uganda], Geneva, Zurich and Harvard and, in Princeton Theological Seminary. He worked with the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches in Geneva (1974-1980). In 1983-2003 he was "part-time" professor of the Science of Mission and Extra-European Theology at the University of Bern. He has published over 400 items including books, articles, essays, poems, and book reviews in the fields of Christianity, theology, biblical studies, ecumenics, literature and African religion. He has been awarded three honorary doctorate degrees: LHD (h.c.) in 1973 by Barrington College, U.S.A.; the Dr. Theol. (h.c.) in 1991 by the University of Lausanne, Switzerland; and the D.D. (h.c.) in 1997 by the General Theological Seminary, New York.¹

Rev. Canon Professor Emeritus **John Samuel Pobee** (1937-) is the Vicar General of the (Anglican) Diocese of Accra, Ghana. He studied with John S. Mbiti at the University of Cambridge. His areas of specialization are in the New Testament, Missiology & Ecumenics, and Liturgy and Worship. He was once his country's Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Head of Chancery of the Embassy of Ghana in Washington DC.²

A Summary of: *African theology revisited* by **John S. Pobee**

Prof. Pobee recalls that Prof. Harry Sawyerr³ and Mbiti were among the few in the late 1950's who believed that theology in Africa was in a state of "northern captivity" and who worked to answer "the need to search for and develop African theology". Although at the end of the 19th century the concept "gone Fantee" [meaning, an integration of African heritage and "authentic" Christianity (and not "European" or "Northern") (page 136)] was already present, it was Mbiti's work that has contributed much to the study and has provided references to scholars who followed along this line. This study is now seen as dealing with "the true nature of theology", whereas earlier critics labeled such works as either "African nationalism donning theology and religion" or "the heathenisation of the African Church". (137)

Pobee states theology as *articulation*, or *naming*, of "the hopes and fears of people in the light of God's word and self-disclosure". That naming is "about respecting, understanding the language, liturgy, structure, style, architecture, etc. of a distinctive community of discourse." (135) Again, "It is

¹ Sources: <http://www.baylor.edu/lariat/news.php?action=story&story=18772> accessed 2.Jan.2012;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mbiti,_J._S._%28African_philosopher%29 accessed 2.Jan.2012;
http://www.dacb.org/stories/kenya/mbiti_john.html accessed 14.Oct.2011.

² Source: http://anglicandioceseofaccra.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=62&Itemid=77 accessed 31.Dec.2011.

³ (1909-1986); Sierra Leone; Anglican; see http://www.dacb.org/stories/sierraleone/sawyerr_harry.html accessed 2.Jan.2012.

human attempt to articulate that Word of God in coherent language.”(137) He draws affirmation from the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us of John 1:14. It is in this sense when he speaks that the “self-disclosure of God engages people as they are” – with the perception and expression of which being affected by the people’s context. Therefore, every theology is contextual.

Moreover, theology addresses three areas: the academia, the community of faith, and the world (138). While academia has generally dealt theology with logical propositions, this way, too, is contextual. Mbiti pointed out that an oral, non-written, non-propositional style is therefore just as valid. In communities where theology is within unwritten modes of expression, as in the case of Africa, the collection and analysis of these *articulations* should be a priority. To pay attention to this task is also to pay attention to the people who are producing them. Therefore, “people are subjects of the theological enterprise”; they “help set the agenda of theology”.(138) This statement can be clarified with what Pobee says in page 141, “...bring theology out of the classroom to the people, whose religion after all is subject of the study.” The factors or areas that help set the agenda for African theology are: culture, the context of pluralism, politics, poverty, worship, and biblical scholarship.

In the area of **culture** Pobee remarks that curricula in the universities in the 1950’s catered to the British colonizer’s needs. Upon recognizing that *homo africanus*⁴ is *homo africanus homo religiosus radicaliter* (i.e., radically religious African man), African theology got bigger attention. This worked at trying to “translate” the Christian message into genuine African categories.(139) It was supposedly an attempt to translate the (*authentic*) Word of God into the context. However, Pobee suggests that the direction may as well start from the African culture and work “backwards” toward *classical* Christianity, or toward Christianity as it exists now in Africa. The aim is to harness the potential of originally Eurocentric (137) inherited Christianity for Africa’s benefit.

By **pluralism** Pobee points out that *African theology* concerns and applies to all religions in Africa – African Traditional Religions, Christianity, Islam, [etc.] – which are “in varying compositions in different parts of Africa”(139; also 142 §3). It is distinguished by its dialogue with culture. It has to be *dialectical and dialogical*, in non-hostile *mutuality*, and with emphasis on the personal level rather than the institutional. It has to be *missiological, ecumenical, and holistic*.(142-3) Terminologies on the areas of the divinity and the centrality of Christ must be tackled first in anticipation of Islam’s monotheism and the acceptability of a “finality and absoluteness” in a plural context.

A **political** ethics touching on value systems must be developed. Africa deals heavily with political issues such as on human dignity, unrest, ideologies and slogans both religious and secular, with Power/Possession/Pride at the bottom line. There are politicians “claiming to be the conscience of society”(140), usurping the churches’ self-appointed role.

To do theology in Africa is to tackle **poverty**, either in the material sense or in forms of marginalization and related realities. Pobee especially points out the areas of ecclesiology and ministry as areas needing the most attention. It is here that the context of power (with which European Christianity was shaped) is most evident but has gone unquestioned in relation to the context of powerlessness in African society. A more relevant hermeneutic of the poor (141) has to be arrived at.

Attention must be given to the fact that “*homo africanus* dances out religion”(141). That is, theologizing using propositional statements in academia is not as relevant as it were expressed in **worship** in song, dance, prayer, and oral tradition – activities found in all African religions, and hence strong tools for dialogue. People, therefore, participate directly in the theologizing.

Biblical scholarship must endeavor to connect with the African worldview, and Africa must herself be able to express biblical theology in a way not alien to her. Pobee speaks of the existence of an African Biblical Commentary project.⁵ He says contextualization has also been done in the areas of pastoral studies, church history, and Christian education.

⁴ This may be Bediako’s “African societies taken together as a cultural unit within mankind” in page 376 of the text.

⁵ As of 2006 *The Africa Bible Commentary* has been available; produced by 69 African scholars; published by Word Alive Publishers of Kenya and Zondervan Corp.; <http://www.bibleguidance.co.za/Engarticles/ABC.htm> accessed 31.Dec.2011.

Pobee mentions the more specific terms *African Christian* or *African Islamic Theology* and the *theology of African traditional religions* for use where any of these is referred to, whereas *Black theology* is a Christian theology that responded to racism in South Africa. ✕

Prof. Dr. Kwame Bediako (1945-2008), a historian and theologian from Ghana, was one of three theological advisors for the *Africa Bible Commentary*. Prof. Bediako held doctorates from the Universities of Bordeaux (French Literature) and Aberdeen. He was an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana; Founder/Director of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana; Founder Secretary of the Africa Theological Fraternity; a Director of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies; Honorary Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, New College, Edinburgh; and Honorary Professor in the School of Theology, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.⁶

A Summary of: *John Mbiti's contribution to African theology* by Kwame Bediako

Subdivisions of the article-text:

- Mbiti's theological approach (on page 367)
- Theology as the embodiment of the Gospel (p. 370)
- African traditional religion and culture as *praeparatio evangelica* (p. 372)
- Mbiti's great Africana trilogy (p. 375)
 - *African religions and philosophy* (1969)
 - *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970)
 - *Prayers of African religion* (1974)
- What the gospel brought was Jesus Christ (p. 378)
- The knotty question of Time! (p. 382)
- Conclusion (p. 386)

Mbiti's writings had the desired effect of helping in "rehabilitating Africa's rich cultural heritage and religious consciousness" (386). He was at the same time motivated to respond to his observation that Africa had no "theological awareness", by which he meant the written theological discussions that is the standard in the West. Later he would conclude that Africa's theology is not written but is "in the open, from the pulpit, in the market-place, in the home as people pray, or read and discuss the Scriptures." (387) Mbiti pointed out that "Oral theology is a crucial prerequisite to written theology" (388) in that an academic dealing of theology must consist of the looking at these lived-out expressions of the community of faith, in the everyday lives of the people. Mbiti's biggest contribution to African theology is affirming that the African context is a ready receiver and an able interpreter of the gospel. With him African theology has gone a long way in showing that African religiosity is not "illiterate." (377) Unlike Pobee, Bediako does not give a comment on his use of the phrase *African theology*. It may be understood that he uses it in the sense of *African Christian theology*.

[Mbiti's theological approach]

Mbiti claims that Christian faith in Africa is "an indigenous, traditional and African religion" (368). Even long before the 19th and 20th centuries of European missionary work in Africa the faith was already existing and lived out significantly in many parts of the continent. Therefore greater emphasis should not be given to missionary endeavors over against factors already existing in the continent that has enabled the faith to spread as widely as it has done. Yet in all the discussions he does not see that it is necessary to dwell on the negative characteristics and effects of the recent European missionary works.

He believes that African martyrs during the early parts of the modern African Christian history died for a faith that was not "alien" to them. He says, "African people have taken seriously to Christianity" (369) as for example shown in the way the thousands of African Independent Churches

⁶ Source: <http://zondervan.typepad.com/zondervan/2008/06/kwame-bediako.html> accessed 31.Dec.2011.

have come to exist.⁷ These are “protest churches”(368), a representative of the Africa that did not conform to “imported” expressions of Christianity as manifested in life-areas colonial, ecclesiastical, social, theological, cultural and administrative(369). Mbiti hopes though that the Independent Churches can arrive at articulations nearer in a sense to that of the “historical” Church (i.e., Western).

Mbiti sees Christianity as simply a contextualization of the Gospel, and as the same with theology, is always “indigenous”. He has changed his position from aiming to africanise or indigenize (European/North American) Christianity to articulating the Gospel in Africa’s particular reality.

[Theology as the embodiment of the Gospel]

Mbiti believes that this articulation is a valid expression of the theology of the *Universal Church*. Since the African situation is of extreme complexity then this articulation may produce several African theology types. The Gospel’s true depth will not be effectively brought out unless it is presented in a form understandable to the African world-view.(370) If the message is not clearly perceived then the Church, who is living out this message, will be ineffective in communicating it to the world outside the community of faith. This articulation of the Gospel into the African context is itself the content of African theology; (“...the theology which developed in the very process of communicating the Gospel became simply the logical corollary to theological knowledge within the Christian community.”, 371. Also, this theology will “...evolve spontaneously as the Church teaches and lives her Faith”, 370).

Thus it is in the community life that the articulation originates. It is in communities that everything happens in life, and it is to the community that the articulation is addressed. That is, “salvation” is not a concern of a single individual alone but affects and is affected by his immediate community, to where he belongs and among which he lives. This is how important the sense of community in Africa is. African theology must not aim to discard and replace the things that identify the community. Instead it must enhance the community’s religiosity by leading it to the fulfillment found in the Gospel. The *African* remains who he is with the addition that he is now able to “experience a communal life which has a vaster scope and meaning than tribal life without Christ...”(372).

[African traditional religion and culture as praeparatio evangelica]

Toward Mbiti’s main point that Christianity is not to obliterate Traditional Religions but is to point it to a lack, the answer to which is found only in Christ, he engaged in four areas of study (372-3): biblical theology; Christian theology from the major traditions of Christendom; African religions and philosophy; and actual life and experience of African Christian communities [i.e., Theology of the living Church]. His idea that *Christianity* is not the *Gospel* motivated him in these studies. He believes that Christianity is “the social and cultural embodiment of the Gospel”(373), and hence should be lived out in Africa as that, and not just as a reaction to European missions but is important in itself.

Christianity was embraced and spread rapidly in Africa because of factors inherent in its culture, such as African religiosity and the sense of being celebratory of life, which both go with communal existence. While missionary evangelism spoke of “individualistic” concerns, the African worldview answers to the sense of *communality* inherent in Christianity. It would have helped in [African] Church development had this been dealt with early on.

[Mbiti’s great Africana trilogy]

Bediako sees *African religions and philosophy (1969)* as a religious history, a study of the African traditional and modern life with respect to their religiosity. Mbiti wrote the book to provide a theologian’s perspective on the connection between the people and their religious concepts and practices (i.e., an ontological framework). He studied many⁸ societies in the continent in order to get a unifying picture of African religiosity, pointing out similarities and differences. In this study Christianity, Islam and other religions were embraced as African and belonging to the people’s historical journey just as much as the traditional religions do. His conclusion was that all of these

⁷ AIC’s are described in: <http://www.patheos.com/Library/African-Independent-Churches/Historical-Development.html> and <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/handbook/church-families/african-instituted-churches/dictionary-of-the-ecumenical-movement-african-instituted-independent-churches.html> .

⁸ In <http://web.archive.org/web/20040822203948/http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1746> accessed 14.Oct.2011, he states **300 tribes** were involved for his next major work *Concepts of God in Africa*.

religions except Christianity prepared the way for Christianity and therefore it is valid for Christianity to be committed in pointing Africa to Jesus Christ.

Concepts of God in Africa (1970) enabled Mbiti to systematically state that pre-Christian Africa had a knowledge of God. This is seen in the contents of wisdoms sayings, myths, ritual pronouncements and prayers found in a sample of 270 different societies of the continent. Mbiti sees that religion has a very important place in Africa's culture and believes that many African pre-Christian ideas are similar to those in the Old Testament.

The prayers of African religion (1974) is a theological interpretation of African pre-Christian prayers. It is a compilation accounting African spirituality manifested "in the yearning for holiness, purity and cleanliness of heart, in the pervasive sense of dependence, faith, trust and confidence in God, and in the immense capacity for joy and thanksgiving"(378). Mbiti points out that of the three books it is here with the prayers where Africa's inherent spirituality is most clearly shown.

[What the gospel brought was Jesus Christ]

The proclamation of the Gospel by 19th and 20th century missionaries enabled African peoples to recognize Jesus Christ as the *finality* and *completion* of African religiosity. Mbiti believes that Christian theology ought to be Christology because everything it says depends on how it looks at Jesus Christ. Furthermore, since Jesus did not start a religion, then Christianity should not be classified just as a religion but is in fact a total way of life.

Just as Jesus' call to discipleship involves the whole person in close relationship with God the Father, so Mbiti sees this person's totality engaged in African religiosity. This totality involves the whole life-environment, labeled as "five-fold categories of African ontology": God, Spirits, Man, Animals, Plants and inanimate creation. (380; compare with list in 384) The condition in any of these parts affects the others. It's not only the individual that is involved but his whole sphere of life. It is in this sense that Christianity is/should/will be integrated into (their) lives, "answering African needs and being firmly rooted in our culture."(382)

[The knotty question of Time!]

Time is basically perceived in connection with events or happenings themselves, but is not abstracted as an independent quantity that can be counted in exact units. According to Mbiti African life is best analyzed within their concept of time, which is perceived basically as either *past* or *present* and having little concern with the future. Explanations for questions concerning the present are looked for from the past. The past is the realm of the ancestors, who are thought to be continually taking part in the life of their community. The past is as alive as the present (385) and is as important. It is only in both realms where existence can be enacted — i.e., the interaction of God-Spirits-Man-Animals-Inanimate. The future does not have this characteristic.

Eschatology as an end or future event is not a very relevant theme for the African worldview. From Africa's perspective it would not have been among the themes validating the success of mission work in Africa (i.e., "Mbiti dissented from the view that "eschatology provides the basis and impetus for early Christian missionary activity"", 382). For Africa the "golden age" is not in the future but is in the past. The past (*Zamani*) is seen as the foundation of the present (*Sasa*). Since man's origin is in God, then God belongs to *Zamani*. Also, since all living men will go to the realm of the dead (*Zamani*), then all that are essential to African life are seen in *Sasa* or in *Zamani*. Hence it is said that the traditional African thought "moves backwards into the past". (383) The *future* is just only about a few months from *now* and is not a *far-away* future. Mbiti therefore believes that eschatology should be shown as not depending only on the sense of a "three-dimensional time-scale"(386) that is past-present-future, but on a perspective of Christ. He says this can be done in any culture. ✕

Uploaded in pdf form at <http://sacadalang.wordpress.com/2014/08/01/on-john-samuel-mbiti-and-religious-plurality-in-africa> on August 1, 2014. Please access the Post for the specific pdf URL. ✕

An Additional Note

Concerning the *Bantu culture* mentioned in page 385, a word *ubuntu* in this dialect speaks of humanness, and is also an indication of the Bantu culture. Such a concept is called differently in other African dialects is relevant to the entire African continent. ✖

What is Ubuntu?

The word 'Ubuntu' originates from one of the Bantu dialects of Africa, and is pronounced as uu-Boon-too.

It is a traditional African philosophy that offers us an understanding of ourselves in relation with the world. According to Ubuntu, there exists a common bond between us all and it is through this bond, through our interaction with our fellow human beings, that we discover our own human qualities. Or as the Zulus would say, "Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu", which means that a person is a person through other persons. We affirm our humanity when we acknowledge that of others.

The South African Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes Ubuntu as:

"It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with Ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them."

Source: <http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/7-22-2006-103206.asp> accessed 2.Jan.2012.

Again, Desmond Tutu describes this perspective as:

ubuntu 'is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am a human because I belong. I participate. I share.'" In essence, I am because you are.

From a translation offered by Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee:

Ubuntu: "I am what I am because of who we all are."

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_%28philosophy%29 accessed 2.Jan.2012.