



# *Debating the Steps to Decolonize Theological Education in Africa*

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Nyika, Felix Chimera, Mzee Herman Y. Mvula, and Kenneth R. Ross, eds. *Decolonizing the Theological Curriculum in an Online Age*. Zomba, Malawi: TSM Press, 2022. Pp. 426. K 22,000 (paperback); US\$62.37, £53.36 (paperback); US\$62.37, £50.82 (eBook).<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

*Decolonizing the Theological Curriculum in an Online Age* is a vital contribution to the ongoing dialogue on how to reform theological education in light of both its colonial history and recent technological transformations in learning. This volume arose from the young Theological Society of Malawi's second national theological conference (2021), and their deliberations upon the necessity of decolonization. The book addresses the growing recognition that many theological institutions, particularly in the majority world are still shaped by Eurocentric assumptions, colonial power dynamic, and western theological frameworks. At the same time, it grapples with the challenges and possibilities of delivering decolonized theological education through online platforms.

In an era when theological education is increasingly delivered digitally, this book explores how technology can either perpetuate the old colonial structures or be used as a tool to disrupt them. The editors and contributors argue that if decolonization is to be taken seriously, it must extend beyond curriculum content to include pedagogical practices, technology, and the very structures of

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<sup>1</sup> Available locally in Malawi for Kwacha 22,000. Internationally, the volume may be purchased from African Books Collective at <https://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/decolonizing-the-theological-curriculum-in-an-online-age>

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theological education itself. The book not only reflects on the need for change but offers practical case studies and thoughtful critique on how decolonization can be realized in theological institutions today.

**Overview: Structure & Content**

This book can be divided into five major categories as different authors explore the main theme of the book from different word views. Each category addresses a crucial aspect of decolonizing theological curricula in an online age:

***Theoretical Foundations for Decolonization***

The chapters in this category —

- Kenneth R. Ross, “Decolonizing the Theological Mind: Work in Progress,”
- Augustine Chingwala Musopole, “Decolonizing the Theological Curriculum in an Online Age,”
- Cogitator Mapala, “Decolonizing Theological Education in Malawi: A Challenge to Curriculum Reforms in Institutions of Higher Learning,”
- Yonah Hisbon Matemba, “Towards an Anticolonial Agenda for Decolonizing Theological Education in the Information Age South of the Sahara,”
- Phoebe Chifungo, “Online Learning and Decolonizing the Theological Curriculum,” and

— introduce core concepts of postcolonial theology and curriculum reform.

**Kenneth R. Ross** recalls Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s compelling call to decolonize the mind, emphasizing that a maturing church must find its own theological voice. This voice will not only contextualize theology but also bring a plurality of perspectives to the global church. Key means of decolonization identified include the use of vernacular languages, the incorporation of indigenous African wisdom traditions, and informing Christian theology with a thoughtful engagement with Islam and African Traditional Religions (ATRs). **Augustine Chingwala Musopole** challenges readers to reflect on their identity as a church in Malawi, asking, “What is our self-understanding of being the church in Malawi?” He questions what it would take to decolonize the theology that has been received, highlighting the need for the church to write its own catechism and to utilize indigenous epistemologies that emphasize relational and holistic ways of knowing.

In a critical examination of educational institutions, **Cogitator Mapala** addresses the current state of decolonization in Malawi’s higher learning environments. He concludes that there is an alarming lack of African resources

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being employed and an excessive reliance on Western curricula, which stifles local theological development. Similarly, **Yonah Hisbon Matemba** points out that the notion of “African Christianity” often hinders the decolonization process. He asserts that to truly advance, it is necessary to decenter European knowledge systems and restore the rightful place of African knowledge in theological education. Adding to this discourse, **Phoebe Chifungo** emphasizes the need to first decolonize one’s thinking to fully embrace the advantages of online learning. Her chapter explores how increased local engagement and the production of knowledge through online platforms can contribute significantly to the decolonization of the theological curriculum. Together, these chapters create a rich tapestry of thought, urging the church and educational institutions to embark on a transformative journey toward decolonization that honors African voices, wisdom, and contexts.

***Contextualization and Indigenous Epistemologies***

The chapters in this category —

- Rhodian Munyenembe, “Epistemological Contextualization: The Place of African Philosophy and African Theology in Decolonizing the Theological Curriculum in an Online Age,”
- Frank Barden Chirwa, “Incorporating Traditional Tonga Theology into a Decolonized Theological Curriculum,” and
- Volker Glissmanni, “Decolonization of Content and Pedagogy: Reflection for Biblical Curriculum Design”

— explore the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge and perspectives into theological education.

**Rhodian Munyenembe** argues that for true decolonization to occur, theological education must be deeply rooted in African philosophy and theology. These disciplines are essential as they reflect an African worldview, sharing a common goal of rediscovering African identity and recovering the African voice and initiative. By grounding theological study in local contexts, Munyenembe emphasizes the transformative potential of African philosophies in shaping a more inclusive curriculum. **Frank Barden Chirwa** builds on this idea by exploring Traditional Tonga theology. He identifies three key concepts from Tongan culture that exemplify general revelation, which can significantly aid in the process of African theologizing. Chirwa advocates for an approach that first seeks to harmonize with Western theology, creating a bridge before embarking on the journey to decolonize African theology. This emphasis on harmonization highlights the need for a thoughtful integration of diverse theological perspectives.

**Volker Glissmanni** contributes to the discussion by reflecting on the content and pedagogy of biblical curriculum design. He argues that theological

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curricula must prioritize biblical knowledge while integrating various disciplines. Additionally, Glissmanni addresses the issue of selectivity in theological education, which has often excluded vital voices and nuances. He advocates for a pedagogical approach that emphasizes dialogue and engagement, calling for a more rigorous involvement of students in their learning processes. Together, these chapters underscore the necessity of contextualization and the incorporation of indigenous epistemologies in theological education, paving the way for a more authentic and relevant theological discourse that resonates with African realities.

***Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation***

In this category, the chapters —

- Winston R. Kawalei, “Decolonization of the Interpretation of Genesis 1 from the Chewa Perspective,”
- Jonathan Nkhoma, “Decolonizing the Bible: Re-reading the Bible through the Lens of African Biblical Hermeneutics,” and
- Takuze Saul Chitsulo, “Contextual Bible Study: Constructing Interpretations that Have Decolonizing Effects”

— explore innovative approaches to biblical interpretation through the lens of African contexts.

**Winston R. Kawalei** demonstrates how employing the Chichewa language and Chewa creation myths can lead to a clearer and more nuanced interpretation of Genesis 1 than traditional English interpretations provide. By drawing from local linguistic and cultural resources, Kawalei highlights the importance of context in understanding scripture, showing that interpretation is not merely a linguistic exercise but a culturally embedded practice. **Jonathan Nkhoma** further expands this dialogue by comparing various approaches used in African biblical hermeneutics. He emphasizes that African biblical hermeneutics seeks liberation and cultural sensitivity, moving beyond the often-rigid frameworks found in Western models. This approach not only honors the unique experiences and perspectives of African communities but also fosters a more participatory and inclusive reading of the Bible, enabling readers to connect deeply with the text. **Takuze Saul Chitsulo** adds another layer to this discussion through his exploration of contextual Bible study. He argues that African contextual biblical hermeneutics employs a tri-polar approach that simultaneously considers the African context and the biblical text. In this process of appropriation, there is ample room for dialogue, allowing the community to ‘own’ the Word of God. Chitsulo contends that this ownership is crucial for achieving liberation from colonial interpretations that have historically marginalized African voices. Together, these chapters illuminate the significance of decolonizing biblical interpretation by incorporating local

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languages, cultural narratives, and community engagement. They advocate for a richer, more authentic understanding of scripture that resonates with the lived experiences of African Believers.

***Decolonizing Church Historical Perspectives and Theological Education***

In this category, the chapters —

- Felix Chimera Nyika, “Trajectories for a Decolonial Malawian Church Historiography,”
- Kenneth R. Ross and Klaus Fielder, “Decolonizing Malawi Church History: The Making of a Textbook,”
- Joyce Mlenga, “Training of Clergy in the University Context in Malawi: A Reflection for Decolonization in Approaches,” and
- Rabbi Lawrence Janeit Chipao, “Theological Education Decolonization”

— explore the imperative of rethinking church history and theological education in the Malawian context.

**Felix Chimera Nyika** advocates for a historiography that not only identifies colonial influences but also elevates the narratives of African agents within Christian history. Drawing on Christopher Wright’s insights, Nyika proposes a missional approach to church history, emphasizing the role of Christians as agents of God’s holistic redemption. By focusing on these underrepresented voices, Nyika seeks to foster a more inclusive understanding of the church’s historical journey in Malawi. **Kenneth R. Ross** and **Klaus Fielder** contribute to this discourse by detailing the process of creating a decolonized view of Malawian church history. Their chapter emphasizes the importance of highlighting local stories, the roles of women, and the contributions of smaller, non-missionary founded churches. This approach aims to recover lost voices and ensure that the history of the Malawian church is represented in a way that resonates with its cultural and social realities.

**Rabbi Lawrence Janeit Chipao** complements these discussions by engaging with Juan José Tamayo’s work, *Theologies of the South: The Decolonizing Turn*.<sup>2</sup> Chipao proposes that Tamayo’s findings provide valuable insights into the process of decolonization in theological education. By considering alternative theological frameworks, Chipao advocates for a more culturally relevant and contextually sensitive approach to theological training in Malawi. Together, these chapters illuminate the critical need for decolonizing church historiography and theological education in Malawi. They advocate for a more inclusive, contextual understanding of the church’s history and the

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<sup>2</sup> Published in Spanish as *Teologías del Sur: El giro descolonizador* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2017). To the best of our knowledge, an English translation does not exist.

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formation of clergy that honors local traditions and spiritual practices, ultimately aiming to empower the Malawian church in its mission and identity.

***Practical Applications of Decolonization in Church and Society***

The chapters in this category —

- Luke Limbithui, “Decolonizing Musical Instruments Usage during Church Worship: Reflection on Western Musical Instruments in Adventist Churches in Malawi,”
- Mzee Hermann Mvula, “Towards a Theology that Responds to Governance and Political Processes in Malawi: A Biblical Perspective on Good Governance from the Book of Deuteronomy,”
- Timothy Kabulunga Nyasulu, “Towards a Practical Approach to Decolonization of Theology in Malawi with Reference to Chipangano Church in Mzimba District,” and
- Brian Theu, “Decolonizing the Theological Curriculum: A Driving Force for Responding to Witchcraft Pastoral Questions”

— offer insights into how decolonization can be practically applied within church practices and societal governance.

**Luke Limbithui** explores the use of musical instruments in church worship, comparing the biblical accounts of 1 Chronicles 13 and Daniel 3. He argues that just as the Israelites embraced local instruments in their worship of God, contemporary churches should feel empowered to incorporate traditional instruments into their services. This shift not only honors local culture but also enriches the worship experience, allowing congregations to connect more authentically with their heritage. **Mzee Hermann Mvula** shifts the focus to governance, examining the implications of Deuteronomy 17 for contemporary Malawian politics. He argues that the biblical text offers vital guidelines for good governance and serves as a critical resource for addressing the colonial legacy that has often neglected the theological engagement with public life. By applying biblical principles to modern governance, Mvula advocates for a theology that actively informs and shapes political processes in Malawi.

**Timothy Kabulunga Nyasulu** highlights the role of the Chipangano Church in Mzimba District, asserting that African Initiated Churches (AICs) have been historically sidelined despite being “pioneers of decolonization” (312). He commends the Chipangano Church for its orthodox beliefs and practices, noting its commitment to inclusivity and discipline, particularly in welcoming the lost. Nyasulu’s insights reveal how grassroots movements within the church can drive theological innovation and social transformation. **Brian Theu** addresses a pressing pastoral concern regarding witchcraft. He proposes that instead of merely debating whether witchcraft involves spiritual forces, the

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Church should take this issue seriously and respond pastorally. Theu advocates for making ATRs a core subject in theological education, emphasizing the importance of addressing these issues directly and compassionately. Collectively, these chapters underscore the practical implications of decolonization for church practices and societal governance. They advocate for a theology that is not only reflective of local contexts but also actively engages with pressing social issues, fostering a more relevant and impactful church in Malawi.

### **Evaluation**

While the contributors come from a variety of backgrounds, all agree on the necessity and urgency of decolonization for the future of the Malawian church and her theologizing. As the editors note in the introduction, while Malawi may be “historically post-colonial,” they are still heavily influenced by colonialism (17). Certainly, the same could be said for Malawi’s neighbors on the continent, and therefore the deliberations contained in this book are applicable across the continent and beyond.

Some themes arise repeatedly: the need for theologizing in vernaculars and, when employing colonial languages, to appropriate them in ways that seek to undo their original effect of hegemony. Multiple chapters discuss the impact of the present online age, debating whether online education simply increases the divide between powerful and powerless, or whether it can truly help in decolonizing both knowledge and means of knowing. The contributors agree that one step in decolonization of theological education is to incorporate more African voices into the curriculum and recover African agency in the church’s history. Yet even that is not simple, as it can be difficult to find resources that are suitable for use as assigned readings in theological institutions. Surely this lack is a clarion call for academics to write contextually-appropriate resources for the church and the academy!

There is also agreement that the overall shape and approach of theological curriculums inherited from Western missionaries needs a major overhaul, so that non-Western approaches can be centered. In other words, there is concern with the depth and extent of decolonization. For instance, is replacing Western textbooks with African-authored ones sufficient? No. Does having African leaders of institutions or countries guarantee decolonization has occurred? No, not necessarily, if ways of thinking and practices have not changed. The desire that is expressed again and again in this book is for a thorough transformation, one which takes seriously African agency and African contributions which the global church needs to hear.

As in any edited volume, the quality of chapters varies — there are a few

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chapters with little connection to the overall theme. For example, **Chipao's** chapter has but one clear reference to Malawi, and instead mainly consist of summary of Tamayo's *Theologies of the South*. It was also surprising to find one author, **Matemba**, arguing against 'African Christianity' yet for decolonization, which seems somewhat contradictory, as it would seem that decolonization against a Western form of Christianity implies that other forms of Christianity exist, and furthermore exist legitimately. **Matemba's** stance is that if Christianity is already African, then what is decolonization from (or for)? At the same time, he argues for an anti-colonial approach in order to decolonize. This seems contradictory. In response, we would ask, if Christianity *cannot* become African, why engage in a debate on decolonization at all? Yet Matemba asserts that Christianity in Africa is not an African religion, and Christianity is and will always be foreign. On this point, the author can expect strong dissent from others, particularly in a volume dedicated to decolonization.

A strength of this volume is the diversity of perspectives included, both ecclesiastically and in terms of disciplinary specialties: some chapters address hermeneutics, some focus on curriculum reform, while yet others focus on Malawian church history. In other words, the multifaceted nature of this book means that it offers a fuller picture of the state of theologizing in Malawi, as well as insights into various aspects of decolonization. The volume's size also indicates the ongoing struggle of decolonization, which requires a long-term commitment to re-forming one's views. Decolonization will not take place easily or quickly, but it will be worth it for the church locally and globally when the church in each context thinks deeply and brings her wisdom to the universal church.

In light of these insights, it is recommended that the chapters in volumes of this type be organized thematically to enhance readability and coherence. Grouping chapters into distinct categories would allow readers to navigate the critical themes more effectively. This approach would not only honor the diversity of perspectives but also clarify the shared urgency for transformative action in decolonization of theological education. Decolonization will not take place easily or quickly, but it will be worth it for the church locally and globally when the church in each context thinks deeply and brings her wisdom to the universal church.