



From ‘Devil’s Baby’ to Ambassador for Christ: *The Evangelical Legacy of Byang H. Kato*

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Abstract

This article outlines Byang Kato’s legacy, especially his contribution to evangelical theology in sub-Saharan Africa. Kato was raised in African traditional religion, dedicated as a fetish priest at birth. He converted to the Christian faith at age twelve, rising to become a world class evangelical scholar before his tragic death. Kato contended for biblical orthodoxy. Kato warned about syncretistic universalism and endeavored to provide a remedy through sound theological education in Africa. Kato also joined the African identity debate, advocating for a ‘third race’ identity. Kato’s warning is a call for constant vigilance, and his prophetic voice deserves attention. In an era when Africa has become the heartland of Christianity, one pitfall is for the fastest growing church to become the fastest declining church, in terms of biblical fidelity. An authentic paradigmatic Christian expression is required. The church must contend with non-Christian worldviews. Kato’s hermeneutics has much to contribute to today’s Christianity.

Résumé

Cet article présente l’héritage de Byang Kato, en particulier sa contribution à la théologie évangélique en Afrique subsaharienne. Kato a été élevé dans la religion traditionnelle africaine et a été consacré prêtre féticheur à sa naissance. Il s’est converti à la foi chrétienne à l’âge de douze ans et est devenu un érudit évangélique de classe mondiale avant sa mort tragique. Kato a défendu l’orthodoxie biblique. Il a mis en garde contre l’universalisme syncrétique et s’est efforcé d’y remédier en dispensant un enseignement théologique solide en Afrique. Kato a également participé au débat sur l’identité africaine, en plaidant pour une identité de « troisième race ». L’avertissement de Kato est un appel à une vigilance constante et sa voix prophétique mérite d’être entendue. À une

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époque où l'Afrique est devenue le cœur du christianisme, l'un des pièges est que l'église qui connaît la croissance la plus rapide devienne l'église qui connaît le déclin le plus rapide, en termes de fidélité biblique. Une expression chrétienne paradigmatique authentique est nécessaire. L'Église doit faire face à des visions du monde non chrétiennes. L'herméneutique de Kato a beaucoup à apporter au christianisme d'aujourd'hui.

Resumo

Este artigo descreve o legado de Byang Kato, especialmente a sua contribuição para a teologia evangélica na África subsariana. Kato foi criado na religião tradicional africana, tendo sido dedicado como sacerdote fetichista à nascença. Converteu-se à fé cristã aos doze anos de idade, tornando-se um acadêmico evangélico de classe mundial antes da sua morte trágica. Kato defendia a ortodoxia bíblica. Kato alertou para o universalismo sincretista e esforçou-se por encontrar uma solução através de uma educação teológica sólida em África. Kato também se juntou ao debate sobre a identidade africana, defendendo uma identidade de "terceira raça." O aviso de Kato é um apelo à vigilância constante, e a sua voz profética merece atenção. Numa época em que a África se tornou o coração do cristianismo, uma das armadilhas é que a igreja que mais cresce se torne a igreja que mais declina, em termos de fidelidade bíblica. É necessária uma expressão cristã paradigmática autêntica. A igreja tem de se confrontar com visões do mundo não cristãs. A hermenêutica de Kato tem muito a contribuir para o cristianismo atual.

Keywords

Byang Kato, African identity, Biblical Christianity, Christian African, African Evangelicalism, Syncretistic universalism

Mots-clés

Byang Kato, identité africaine, christianisme biblique, chrétiens africains, évangélisme africain, universalisme syncrétique

Palavras-chave

Byang Kato, identidade africana, cristianismo bíblico, cristão africano, evangelicalismo africano, universalismo sincretista

Introduction

African contribution to theological discourse has not been adequately acknowledged in the history of the Church. Africans were among the forty

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authors of the Bible, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.² Many key Bible characters have deep connections to Africa. Israel as a nation was birthed in Africa. Abraham and the Lord Jesus Christ with his earthly parents found refuge in Africa. The shaping of classical Christianity was largely done on African soil.³ However, for reasons of scope when I refer to the African church today, I will limit my comments to sub-Saharan Africa. The history of the Church in sub-Saharan Africa is relatively modern, under two and half centuries. Even in the current history of the church, the contributions of Africans are not adequately captured.

Protestant forms of Christianity began entering sub-Sahara Africa with the return of freed slaves from Europe and North America in the late eighteenth century.⁴ The establishment and spread of Christianity were in tandem with commerce, civilization, and colonialism. Christianity was shaped by western perspectives and theologizing. Efforts of African intellectuals to free themselves from colonial shackles and attain freedom gained momentum in the middle of the twentieth century. While the core of these efforts was for political freedom and liberation, church men and women endeavored for self-theologizing, devoid of paternalism from western missionary endeavors. A few competing theologies emerged with the magisterial works of some of the burgeoning theologians from various denominational background. This article focuses on the contribution of Byang Kato, a young Nigerian who emerged on the scene of theological discourse in the mid-1970s, critically engaging the emerging theological systems. Kato was opposed to the work of some of the leading African theologians then. In his groundbreaking work, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*,⁵ he lamented what he deemed as 'syncretistic universalism' in the Church. In critiquing the theologies of others, Kato aspired to define and establish what he considered to be biblical Christianity and evangelicalism.

Brief Biography of Byang Kato (1936–1975)

Byang Kato was born and raised in Kwoi, from the Ham or Jabba ethnic group in Kaduna State in the predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria. Kato

² Ed Stetzer and Philip Nation, "Purpose of *The Mission of God Study Bible* and How to Use It," vii.

³ Thomas C. Oden, *Rebirth of African Orthodoxy: Return to Foundations*, 48.

⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, 139.

⁵ *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (1975) was the monograph revision of Byang Kato's doctoral dissertation, "A Critique of Incipient Universalism in Tropical Africa" (1974). Paul Bowers has noted that *Theological Pitfalls* was Kato's "maiden effort" which should be understood "not as a final word but as a first word, a promise of what might have come had Kato been spared." "Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy," 85.

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was born on 23 June 1936 to Hari and Zawi who were adherents of the African traditional religion of the Jaba people. The Jaba were resistant to the predominant Islamic region in Northern Nigeria and were vulnerable to suppression by the Islamic ruling class.⁶ As a child, Kato was dedicated as a fetish priest to the tribal God known as *Pop-ku*.⁷ Given the circumstances of his birth and childhood, Kato self-identified as the "Devil's baby."⁸ His immersion into the traditional culture and belief system was exceptional. Raised as a child in the best tradition of his tribe, he performed the traditional rite of passage to transition from childhood to adulthood, at the age of ten.⁹ The initiation rites conferred further sense of ethnic identity, evidenced by the visibly incised tribal marks he bore on his temples. The initiation rite was an important milestone in his development as a traditional African child. The initiation was also the means of acquiring essential skills for livelihoods and other manhood responsibilities in the society.

Kato encountered Christian missionaries in his village and converted to Christianity at the age of twelve. His conversion to Christianity was another important milestone that radically changed his life, and from being the 'devil's baby' to an 'ambassador of Christ.'¹⁰ A missionary lady of the Sudan Inland Mission (SIM, now Service in Mission) presenting the gospel message on a gramophone in the village square in Kwoi attracted Kato. He followed the missionary to Sunday School at the SIM central church in Kwoi and eventually enrolled in the mission primary school. Kato gave his life to Christ when his Nigerian teacher taught the class the bible story about Noah and the Ark, emphasizing the way humans and other creatures were saved through the flood. Kato perceived the need for salvation through Jesus Christ from the pending judgement of a sinful world and testifies: "One day the teacher told us the exciting story of Noah and his ark. At the end he solemnly applied the story to us in a personal way, inviting us to accept the Lord as Savior. I did so with a child's faith and sincerity, little realizing all that was involved."¹¹ However, Kato's father objected to his son's association and enrolment in the missionary school, a threat for the young Kato succeeding his father as fetish priest in the

⁶ Yusufu Turaki, *Tainted Legacy: Islam, Colonialism and Slavery in Northern Nigeria*, 113.

⁷ Sophie de la Haye, *Byang Kato: Ambassador of Christ*, 17.

⁸ Byang Kato, "The Devils Baby," 1.

⁹ de la Haye, *Byang Kato*, 17–81.

¹⁰ In April 1975, Kato wrote an appeal which summarized his own approach to Christian life: "Our greatest need is to live up to the claims we make as Christians in Africa, and promote the Christian message for Africa in all areas of life and everywhere possible as true ambassadors of Christ." *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 37. Recognizing this, de la Haye gave her biography of Kato the subtitle *Ambassador of Christ*.

¹¹ Kato, "The Devil's Baby," 2.

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clan. Ironically, Kato's grandfather intervened and prevailed on Kato's father for the young man to enroll in school, one year later, at Byang's own expense. However, Kato's father ensured Byang met his obligations in helping on the farm and could have been involved with daily negotiations with the family, living out his faith while under the same roof with his father. Converting to Christianity added to young Kato's woes in the family, as he was persecuted by his father. He also worked part-time in the home of missionaries to earn money for his school fees.¹²

Kato had a blended educational experience, receiving his primary education in a regular mission school but being self-taught for his secondary education. Kato studied on his own and took correspondence courses to sit and pass the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary and Advanced Level examinations to gain entrance to Igbaja Bible College and the London Bible College. He gained admission to the London Bible College in 1963, the first African to do so, and graduating in record time with a Bachelor of Divinity with Honors in 1968. Three years later, he proceeded to the USA for postgraduate studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, where he earned a Master in Systematic Theology (MST) and a doctorate (DTh) in systematic theology, the first person from the evangelical community in sub-Saharan Africa to do so.

Kwoi, Kato's birthplace, remained a vital part of his world. His wife, Jummai Rahila Gandu was a princess of the Jaba ruling house. His three children were also born in Kwoi. He worked among his compatriots and his local community as a teacher, in print media, writer and counsellor, and as pastor before he left Nigeria for further studies. He endeared himself to people, regardless of their social standing. The Kwoi community immortalized him by naming a street in the municipality in his honor, Byang Kato Road.¹³

Kato returned home to his alma mater to teach at the Igbaja Seminary following his studies in the UK. He was elected the following year as General Secretary of the ECWA Church¹⁴ and moved to Jos before leaving for postgraduate studies in the USA in 1970. Immediately after his studies in the USA, Kato was appointed as the first African General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) – now Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA).¹⁵ This appointment was the peak of his career, in terms of his theological contribution and for which he is remembered. He doubled as the Executive Secretary of the AEA Theological

¹² de la Haye, *Byang Kato*, 22.

¹³ Aiah Dorkuh Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato: The Life and Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theologian*, 142.

¹⁴ The Evangelical Church Willing All is an African denomination that grew out of SIM mission work in what is now Nigeria. One of the largest church denominations in Nigeria, it now has congregations in at least nineteen countries.

¹⁵ See AEA's website, <https://aeafrica.org/>

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Commission. As the leader of this organization of African evangelicals, he was connected to the global evangelical family within the World Evangelical Alliance. He served on the executive board of WEA as Vice President and was first Chairperson of the WEA Theological Commission. Kato was plenary speaker at the maiden Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization in 1974, where he presented two papers. However, Kato's tenure as the preeminent leader of African evangelicals lasted for a little over two years before his tragic death by drowning at Mombasa, Kenya.

Byang Kato's Theological Legacy

Because Byang Kato did not craft a theological tradition of his own with his name on it, some do not find Kato's theological contribution to be popularly acceptable. His polemics may not fit into the mode of theological innovation like others with unique philosophical ideas of their own. However, my earlier study demonstrates the defining contours of Kato's theological legacy, especially his hermeneutics, understanding of African Christian identity, and contribution to evangelical theological education.¹⁶ A critical evaluation of Kato's life and ministry shows how his theological views were shaped. His education and the socio-cultural context in which he was raised may have shaped his worldview and his theology.

Kato was schooled in "the Anglo-American 'fundamentalist evangelical' movement with their hard-won battle over biblical inerrancy and fundamentalist hermeneutics and theological convictions."¹⁷ According to Asumang, "the authoritative voice of the Bible interpreted largely from a fundamentalist evangelical hermeneutics is the bedrock of evangelicalism."¹⁸ Kato thus favored the literal grammatico-historical interpretation of Scripture.¹⁹ The Anglo-American evangelical movement is a coalition of different evangelical traditions. According to Harris,

Fundamentalism developed out of nineteenth-century Anglo-American evangelicalism. It was a strange coalition of diverse evangelical groups who rallied against the common enemy of theological liberalism. In particular, they were unified in upholding the truth of scripture—which they conceived primarily in terms of factual reliability—against the theories of higher criticism.²⁰

¹⁶ Aiah Foday-Khabenje, "An Analytical Biography of Byang Henry Kato (1936–1975): His Theological Legacy and Contribution to Biblical Hermeneutics, African Christian Identity and Evangelical Theological Education."

¹⁷ Annang Asumang, "State of Preaching: Insights from Global South," 6.

¹⁸ Asumang, "State of Preaching: Insights from Global South," 6.

¹⁹ Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 78.

²⁰ Harriet A. Harris, "Fundamentalism and Evangelicals," 2.

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There have been debates about the differences between what are now two distinct traditions of Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism. Stott highlights the difference between fundamentalism and evangelicalism, writing: “The evangelical faith is not a synonym for fundamentalism. The word ‘fundamentalism’ originally referred to publications of Christian truths or affirmations of the Christian faith called ‘The Fundamentals’. However, the word has become a slur which evangelicals reject; they would not accept the fundamentalist label.”²¹ For others, such as Asumang, the lines between fundamentalism and evangelicalism appeared to be blurred.²² Kato battled liberalism to the left and also the conservatives to the extreme right, like the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC) with roots in American fundamentalism and separatism.

Kato metaphorically referred to the rather uncomfortable position he found himself as “meat in the sandwich,”²³ caught in the middle of the extreme left liberal ecumenists and the extreme right separatists with legalistic zeal, aggressive separatism and belief in their own extremist interpretation of Scripture. According to Breman, Kato stated:

We are called names, ‘neo-evangelicals’ by the right, and ‘separatists’ by the left. Missionaries have refused to have fellowship with me because I’m too ecumenical, and in other places, I’ve been called a separatist who has been deceived by American missionaries! . . . maybe we are in the right place when we are criticized by both sides.²⁴

The evangelical stream of the Church which Kato embraced for his doctrinal and theological beliefs had itself become a mark against him for some. Quoting from an anonymous source, Asumang states:

a statement released in 1960 . . . sums up the ethos of this fundamentalist hermeneutics. It asserts that the choice before every new generation is “between a Christianity that is consistent with itself and one that is not . . . between one that is wholly God-given and one that is partly man-made.” We have to choose whether to

²¹ John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness*, 19–20.

²² Asumang, “State of Preaching,” 7.

²³ Byang Kato, *The Spirits*, 17.

²⁴ Quoted in Christina Breman, “A Portrait of Dr. Byang H. Kato,” 146; citing Kato, “Ecclesiastical Structures Today.” On the historical tensions between the ecumenists of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) and the evangelicals associated with the Lausanne Movement and organizations such as the Association for Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), see Wouter Theodoor van Veelen, “‘No other name!’ The Contribution of Byang H. Kato to the Salvation Debate.”

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bow to the authority of the Son of God, or whether on our own authority to discount and contravene a part of His teaching; whether to rest content with Christianity according to Christ, or whether to go hankering after a Christianity according to the spirit of our age; whether to behave as Christ's disciples, or as His tutors. We have to choose whether we will accept the biblical doctrine of Scripture as it stands, or permit ourselves to re-fashion it according to our fancy.²⁵

The fixation of the pioneers of African theologies in the post-colonial era of the late 1960s was the indigenization and inculturation of Christianity into African worldviews. Thus, the tendency was the cohabitation of African traditional religions and "Christianity under one camp."²⁶ Kato draws his importance in laying the foundation for understanding evangelicalism, especially in the African context.

With the confusion about the meaning of the word 'evangelical,' there is need to explore the meaning of this term and Kato's understanding of it. The word 'evangelical' originates from the Greek word *euangélion* and means 'Good News.' While this may be a reference to the whole Bible, God's word to the world, specifically, the good news is about the person of Jesus Christ atoning for sins of all people for their redemption and justification. The first four books of the New Testament, narrating the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, from four different perspectives, are referred to as the Gospels or Good News of Jesus Christ. Evangelicals have a high view of the Bible, all sixty-six books as the word of God and adhere to its infallibility and inerrancy.²⁷ The Bible is authoritative in all things about faith in God and the conduct of believers. This belief is consistent with orthodoxy, defended by the Reformation and Church fathers in the early church, believed to be consistent with the Apostles' teaching and New Testament Christianity. Alluding to the well-known survey findings by Bebbington, Stott writes: "Evangelicalism is characterized by *conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism*"²⁸—this emphasis on the Bible, the Cross, conversion, and activism are known as the evangelical quadrilateral.

Evangelicals read the Bible with these presuppositions and follow a particular way of interpretation to inform their hermeneutics. A preferred evangelical hermeneutic is the inductive Bible study method, that looks for

²⁵ Asumang, "State of Preaching," 7

²⁶ Kato, "Critique of Incipient Universalism," ThD diss., 13.

²⁷ It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage with the debate regarding the parameters of the *infallibility and inerrancy* of Scripture.

²⁸ Stott, *Evangelical Truth*, 28.

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evidence in the text and the context to possible conclusion or inferences about the meaning of the text. According to Bombaro:

A truly evangelical reading of Scripture would be a gospel-oriented reading of Scripture, where the Bible's in-built hermeneutic of christocentrism would override special interest interpretations; that self-presenting biblical hermeneutic already stands codified in at least two other extra-biblical sources of authority — “the canon of Truth,” and the classic, consensual interpretation of Scripture. These three things, together, preserve the Bible's authoritative witness, nature, and content from fraudulent biblicist manipulations and misappropriations.²⁹

While the high view and approach to interpretation is shared by evangelicals generally in the global Church, application of the gospel is contextual. Thus, at the heart of evangelical theology in Africa is engaging the dominant socio-cultural and African traditional religious worldviews with the biblical worldview that is authentically African and biblical. Sound theology affirms the validity of Scripture and its authoritative relevance.

Kato's 'lone' voice “in the chorus of positive evaluations of the African pre-Christian religious heritage”³⁰ informing hermeneutical discourse in Africa may appear to be 'rejectionist.' However, a study of Kato reveals his theological constructs were non-conformist and more consistent with the received apostolic teaching, trustworthy and entirely reliable for faith and conduct.³¹ The way the early interpreters of the Bible shaped the understanding of the church was articulated by Vincent of Lérins (d. c. 445), a French monk. According to Oden:

Christian teaching consists in “what you have received, not what you have thought up; a matter not of ingenuity, but of doctrine; not of private acquisition, but of Public Tradition; a matter brought to you, not put forth by you, in which you must be not the author but the guardian, not the founder but the sharer, not the leader, but the follower.”³²

Classical doctrinal belief was that which has been believed and lived out by the faith community in all cultures and believed from the time of the apostolic witness. Also, that which has been accepted by the general consent of both clergy and laity in the whole church, over the whole world, in all generations.. This is succinctly stated as universality, apostolic antiquity and conciliar consent.³³

²⁹ John J. Bombaro, Review of *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture*, 84.

³⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, xviii.

³¹ Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato*, 195.

³² Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory*, XXII.27, quoted in Oden, *Rebirth of African Orthodoxy*, 114–115.

³³ Oden, *African Orthodoxy*, 191.

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Kato affirms the place of the early patristic fathers, and writes:

It is often forgotten that the Apostolic Creed, on which most Western church creeds are based, was composed by Europeans, Asians, and Africans. Athanasius, the great architect of the earliest Christian creed and defender of Orthodoxy, arose out of Africa. Other theologians of Africa, Arius and Origen, of course, were not condoned in their false views. Inevitably, many cultural tendencies were passed on to the converts by the Western missionary.³⁴

Kato's theological vision was preservation and application of these conservative perspectives of biblical Christianity in the African church, even if and rightly so, these views had resonance with other regions of the world. Kato's angst and opposition for much of what was trending in theological circles was the basis for his writing and theological contribution. Kato states the purpose for his doctoral research thus:

The primary purpose of this study is to sound an alarm and warn Christians from both sides of the argument concerning the dangers of universalism. The noble desire to contextualize Christianity in Africa must not be forsaken. An indigenous theology is a necessity. But must one betray scriptural principles of God and His dealing with man at the altar of any regional theology? Should human sympathy and rationalism override what is clearly taught in the Scriptures? Many voices in Africa and outside the continent are answering these questions in the affirmative. Their number is increasing as the days go by. In a small way, at least, the writer wants to alert the Christians in Africa and the gullible enthusiasts of Africa indigenization from overseas concerning these trends. The second purpose is to bring to the attention of the proponents of 'African Theology' ecumenists, and all others with universalistic tendencies, the fact that there is another way of looking at the relationship between Christianity and African religions. It is not neocolonialism to plead the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ. It is not an air of superiority to herald the fact that all who are not "in Christ" are lost. It is merely articulating what the Scriptures say.³⁵

Kato was not opposed to contextualization and African Theology *per se*, however, he was skeptical about the tendency to *merge* African traditional

³⁴ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 176. Kato's assertion here about Origen is unfortunate, reflecting western defamation of Origen. While some of Origen's speculations err into heterodoxy, everything he taught as doctrine was accepted as orthodox.

³⁵ Byang H. Kato, "A Critique of Incipient Universalism in Tropical Africa: A study of the religious concepts of the 'Jaba' people of West Africa," 59.

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religious beliefs and practices with Christianity. He actually introduced the subject of contextualization in his plenary presentation at the maiden Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization.³⁶ He states: "Theology should be expressed in the context of every people for their understanding and practice, but Christian Theology does not need polarization, which has a tendency of adding to or subtracting from the gospel of Christ."³⁷ He emphasized the need for contextualization and states:

If there is any need in the Church of Christ in Africa today, it is the need for theology expressed in the context of Africa by Africans and for Africans. Professor John S. Mbiti has rightly observed, 'Mission Christianity was not from the start prepared to face a serious encounter with either traditional religions and philosophy or the modern changes taking place in Africa. THE CHURCH HERE NOW FINDS ITSELF IN THE SITUATION OF TRYING TO EXIST WITHOUT A THEOLOGY.'³⁸

On his reticence about the emerging 'African Theology,' Kato made his reservation known and states:

When it comes to the case of localizing theology, the immediate question that can be legitimately raised is what is the basis of such a theology? Will the Bible still be the source of such a theology? If the answer is affirmative, then is the Bible divided? The obvious answer is that the same Bible speaks to the American, the Asian and the African. If that is the case, then theology is one. There cannot be American theology or African theology. It is true that the term is used sometimes to describe the area where a view is prevalent. But it is a misnomer.³⁹

In his apparent rejection of the term 'African Theology,' Kato did not deny the expression of theology in the context of Africa, however, he urged African theologians to contribute to understanding biblical theology, for the understanding of the "universal body of Christ." In dealing with local issues specific to own context, "the ever-abiding Word of God remains the authoritative source. But this biblical theology should be expressed in terms that are meaningful to every people in their own situation to meet their peculiar needs."⁴⁰

In critiquing others, Kato highlighted his alternate view, convicted that it was a biblical view, on the issues he engaged them. Thus, Kato laid out the

³⁶ Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato*, 201.

³⁷ Byang Kato, "Warning to Evangelicals," 29.

³⁸ Byang Kato, "Written Theology," 1; all caps emphasis original.

³⁹ Kato, "Written Theology," 2.

⁴⁰ Kato, "Written Theology," 2.

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contours of biblical Christianity which he deemed as evangelical theology. Kato summarizes his theological position, writing:

When it comes to the question of Christian understanding of theology, there is only one theology. Theology may be discussed under various departments such as Old Testament Theology, Pastoral Theology, etc. But they are all derived from the same source which is the Bible. All true theology must therefore, be Biblical Theology if it is to be anything Christian. It is accurate to speak of liberal or conservative evangelical theology. The yardstick for determining which is which of course, is the Bible. The liberal views the Bible as a changing book according to man's circumstances. He accepts certain parts and rejects others. The evangelical accepts all the 66 canonical books of the Bible as God-breathed, without error in the original manuscripts, faithfully transmitted and is absolutely trustworthy.⁴¹

Kato's stance on the doctrinal place of the Bible in theologizing and the classical doctrines of the Church were his theological emphases. Even if he himself did not set these out in a systematic account in his writing, Kato was concerned about the historic or classical doctrines of the Christian faith and wrote: "Unless the church in Africa wants to isolate itself from historic Christianity, it should take a position on these vital doctrines."⁴² Kato endeavored to build institutions to promote sound theological training. Kato's contribution went beyond mere rhetoric and warning the church, as he provided a recipe for overcoming theological errors as well as a roadmap for sound theological education. He articulated a vision for sound evangelical theological training on the continent as the cure for these theological pitfalls at all levels, including informal, off-site and home-based education, education for children, and above all, graduate-level theological education.

Speaking on the subject of Christian Higher Education at the First International Conference of Reformed Institutions for Christian Scholarship, Potchefstroom, South Africa, in September 1975, Kato said:

A Church without a sound theological basis is like a drifting boat in a storm without an anchor. The wind of every doctrine is blowing against the Church today. The wind of contextualization is testing the relevance of the boat of evangelical theology. The ill-wind of ecumenism with its call for secularization of Christianity is proving very tempting to the average Christian. The wind of Black theology, with its legitimate quest for human dignity but without an adequate term of reference, appears convincing. The wind of

⁴¹ Kato, "Written Theology," 1-2.

⁴² Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 149.

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African Theology with its rightful search for the African personality yet failing to see the unique nature of Christian revelation, is very appealing. For the ship of evangelical faith to stand the test of the times, it must be grounded on the hope of our fathers.⁴³

Kato saw biblical ignorance as a threat to New Testament or biblical Christianity. In the first place, belief about the Bible and cultural presuppositions have implications for Christian doctrine and practice and thus, theological beliefs. Turaki notes that for Kato, “the Bible was authoritative over the whole of life and everything in life was captive to the Word of God [and thus] his primary tool for doing theology was the Bible.”⁴⁴ While all may lay claim to the bible, the practice may not be consistent with biblical orthodoxy, for which Kato contended. The place and authority of the Bible, what the Bible is, how it is interpreted and applied—biblical hermeneutics— was central in the disputations with other African theologians. The opinion one holds about the Bible also inform the approach and method of interpretation and application.

The orthodox position affirms that the Bible is the Word of God, revealed through the agency of the Holy Spirit, causing God’s word to be written by humans, so others could hear and understand the message and apply in their own contexts (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21). There are others who subscribe to neo-orthodox and liberal views of the Bible and their view of the Bible is mundane, thus undermining its infallibility, inerrancy and authority. Evangelicals, like Kato, hold the orthodox view of the Bible. Evangelical Theology contends for orthodoxy, including fidelity to the Bible as the Word of God, and therefore inerrant, infallible, and authoritative.

Kato crafted the blueprint for evangelical theological education in Africa. Kato’s plan, according to Nystrom, included four objectives:

- i. Develop African evangelical scholars who would write and publish their theological reflections in the African context.
- ii. Develop graduate schools on the continent where African leaders can be trained without having to leave the continent.
- iii. Develop a theological journal for the publication of the theological ideas of African scholars.
- iv. Develop an accrediting agency to set standards for theological education and monitor the progress of schools to maintain standards.⁴⁵

His plan resulted in the establishment of the first two postgraduate theological schools to serve the whole of sub-Saharan Africa; the Accrediting Council for

⁴³ Byang Kato, “Creating Facilities for Evangelical Theological Training in Africa,” 363.

⁴⁴ Yusufu Turaki, “The Theological Legacy of the Reverend Doctor Byang Henry Kato,” 152.

⁴⁵ Carolyn Nystrom, “Let African Christians Be Christian Africans.”

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Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA, now the Association of Christian Theological Education in Africa), an institution for the standardization and accreditation of theological education; and the Christian Learning Materials Centre (CLMC, now Christian Learning Materials for Children), which produced curriculum and Sunday school materials for the nurture and development of children by the church.

Kato's contribution to theological education went beyond Africa; he made an important contribution to the global evangelical church as well. Firstly, Kato himself exemplified a rigorous pursuit of sound theological education in the church in Africa. He paved the way and encouraged both his peers and younger leaders to pursue biblical studies. For example, a renowned African Christian theological educator and a contemporary of Kato, Tite Tiéno, states:

My own introduction to the importance of theology in Africa dates back to the second general assembly of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) in January 1973 at Limuru in Kenya. It was there that Byang Kato became the first African evangelical leader to call attention to theological endeavours in our part of the world. The challenge he gave marked a turning point in evangelical theological development in Africa.⁴⁶

Kato's successor at AEA, Tokunboh Adeyemo, also testifies getting inspiration from Kato for his own theological career.⁴⁷ The list also includes Yusufu Turaki,⁴⁸ among renowned theological scholars in Africa. Kato was a member of the Lausanne Continuation Committee that was setup at the maiden Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization. He was also elected as Vice Chairperson of the World Evangelical Alliance and first Chairperson of WEA's Theology Commission. He made AEA known widely in Africa and beyond.

The quest for African independence and identity was at the heart of African intellectual discourse, including theological reflections. The general perception about the impact of slavery and colonialism in Africa was that it resulted in a loss of African identity and human dignity. The belief was that some Western missionaries aided and abetted their compatriots in the colonial enterprise and thus, contributed to the diminution of African culture and traditional religions, leading to loss and quest for African identity. Thus, the importance of African Christian identity in African theological discourse, to which Kato contributed.⁴⁹

The main proponents of African Christian identity conceived theology primarily as a response to missionary underestimation of the value of African

⁴⁶ Tite Tiéno, "The Theological Task of the Church in Africa: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Be Going?" 3.

⁴⁷ Tokunboh Adeyemo, "Foreword," 11–13.

⁴⁸ Yusufu Turaki in an interview with author in Jos, Nigeria on 27 May 2019.

⁴⁹ Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato*, 133.

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traditional religions and their focus was on establishing how pre-Christian beliefs⁵⁰ would lead them to Christ in the same way as the missionary message from the Bible, even if packaged in Western culture.⁵¹ When African intellectuals turned to African traditional cultural heritage to explain African distinctiveness, African theologians proposed to look to Africa's traditional religious heritage for framing their own distinctive identity. For African theologians like E. Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria (1913–1993), John S. Mbiti (1931–2019) and Jesse N. K. Mugambi (b. 1947) of Kenya, and Kwame Bediako of Ghana (1945–2008), answering the questions African intellectuals were asking was taken to be the defining task of African theology.⁵² But as I have noted elsewhere,

It would appear however that the quest for authentic African identity, by African intelligentsia, paradoxically resulted in exacerbating the identity crisis. The assimilation of Western culture through education and way of life informed much of their reasoning. And yet politically, they wanted to distance themselves from anything Western, and created a portrait of an “African” that was not a true African,⁵³

though perhaps this is more obviously the case for politicians like Robert Mugabe (1924–2019) and for secular African philosophers. Kato especially rejected what he saw as “some theologians seek[ing] to find [their African] identity in African traditional religions,”⁵⁴ such as the “radical continuity” approach of Idowu.⁵⁵

Kato perceived the question and answer to the identity problem differently. In the first place, he questioned the reality of a single African persona. Commenting on the Kinshasa Declaration about “the renaissance of African Personality,”⁵⁶ Kato wrote:

⁵⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 236–239.

⁵¹ Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato*, 164.

⁵² Paul Bowers, “Byang Kato and Beyond: The 2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures 1,” 6.

⁵³ Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato*, 135.

⁵⁴ Kato, *Biblical Christianity*, 26.

⁵⁵ Timothy Palmer, “Byang Kato: A Theological Reappraisal,” 12; borrowing the language of “radical continuity”, “radical discontinuity”, and “middle ground” of Kwame Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century,” in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, edited by Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw, and Tite Tiénou (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998).

⁵⁶ The “Kinshasa Declaration” was given by the Executive Committee of the AACC on 31 October 1971 following AACC conference held in Kinshasa, Zaïre (now DR

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One gains the impression that African peoples enjoyed homogeneity and possessed a single ethos in terms of African Personality in the recent past. Now this loss is being recovered in ecumenism, according to the declaration. But apart from the solidarity of the human race, is there any evidence, written or oral, that all 1,000 peoples or tribes of Africa were one united group of people?⁵⁷

Kato argued further:

The Bible addresses itself to the black man, in his plight. It has done so in pointing out both the dignity and depravity of all men. It is the responsibility of Christian theologians to bring these facts to the knowledge of the public. According to the Bible, believers, under whatever human condition, are already liberated (Gal 5:1).⁵⁸

Kato saw conversion to Christianity as a rebirth – being born again of the Spirit — and therefore becoming a new creation. His new identity was primarily that of a Christian, a child of God and follower of Christ, and a new creation, in accordance with what the Bible says (John 1:12; 2 Cor 5:17). Consequently, he argued that “a search for identity fails to appreciate the uniqueness of Christianity.”⁵⁹

Kato may have been lonely in his theologizing in his time. However, the *ecclesia*, the body of Christ, the church as a whole, was not lost on him. As an African, his personhood was tied to his community, especially the Jaba ethnic people of Kwoi. However, as a Christian, his selfhood went beyond his tribe and, indeed, his Nigerian heritage. Kato's sense of community went beyond *ubuntu*, the highly appreciated African way of relational life, the collectivist culture of interdependence of most African peoples. The search for a true African identity is often skewed to vindicate the African or the Black person. The call has been to turn to a Black theology of liberation or an integrated theological synthesis of ATR beliefs with Christianity – “African theology” – as espoused by some theologians in Kato's time.

However, the more that has been written about the subject of self-understanding or identity, the more elusive the identity question has become. Kato's identity in Christ was his answer to the daunting quest for identity. According to Kato: “From the biblical point of view all people of the world are divided into two groups: the people of God, and the people outside the covenant relationship with God.”⁶⁰ The distinction does not depend on one's race, tribe,

Congo), 18–31 October 1971. Kato quotes the declaration in full in Appendix III of *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 201.

⁵⁷ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 156.

⁵⁸ Kato, *Biblical Christianity*, 52.

⁵⁹ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 13.

⁶⁰ Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 21.

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culture or geography (Luke 12:30). The African identity debate has undercurrent of racial prejudice between Africans (the black people) and their western colonizers with their missionary compatriots. The perception was that slavery and colonialism in Africa resulted in loss of African identity and human dignity. Western missionaries may have aided and abetted their colonial compatriots in demeaning African cultural and belief systems.

Kato's take on the question then was to argue for a "third race" for all who have found new birth in Christ, apart from the earthly identity or race. This resonates with the New Testament and Early Church eras, when in addition to the 'two peoples,' Jews and Gentiles, Christians comprised a third people group, drawn from all ethnic and cultural groups.⁶¹ However, Kato urged "While God should be given the first place in the believer's life, the government also deserves the loyalty of all its citizens, the Christian included."⁶² Kato asserted a 'Christian African' identity, Christian first, then African.⁶³ This describes an identity that transcends the confused split personality between the authentic traditional African and the de-Africanized person by foreign or Western cultures — indeed, that transcends the defaced image of all humanity without Christ, regardless of race, status or origin. Kato's conception of the Christian African identity satisfies the yearning and quest for human dignity and self-worth, not only for the African or Black person but for the whole of humanity, lost and dead in sin. Kato believed he had attained a new identity in this life and the life to come — that of a Christian African.⁶⁴

Conclusion

I have sought to highlight Byang Kato's unique theological contribution in African theological discourse, specifically exploring Kato's life and ministry and theological contribution in the fields of biblical hermeneutics, theological education, and the daunting question of African Christian identity. While Kato certainly "prioritized evangelicalism ... he did not categorically dismiss the sociopolitical aspects of the gospel,"⁶⁵ but recognized that "Christians cannot isolate themselves" from "the strong prophetic demands in Scripture for social justice."⁶⁶ If Kato was radical, it was because he had experienced a radical conversion to Christ. Kato's spiritual journey from birth as a 'devil's baby' to an

⁶¹ For a discussion of Christian identity as a third *genos* (anachronistically translated 'race'), see Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*.

⁶² Byan H. Kato, "Christian Citizenship."

⁶³ Kato, "Critique of Incipient Universalism," 265–266; cf. Kato, *Biblical Christianity*, 52.

⁶⁴ Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato*, 288–289.

⁶⁵ van Veelan, "'No Other Name!'," 69.

⁶⁶ Byang Kato, "Jesus Christ Frees," paragraph 4, quoted in van Veelan, "'No Other Name!'," 70.

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eminent 'ambassador for Christ' contains an important theological lesson. Kato demonstrated his self-understanding of his faith and contended for biblical Christianity to safeguard the church in Africa from syncretistic universalism. He pioneered the establishment of evangelical Christianity in Africa by envisioning and outlining a plan for sound theological education at all levels, especially for founding advanced-level evangelical theological institutions in Africa. The challenges the Church faces in the current era resonates with the issues Kato battled. Therefore, Kato's theological legacy is an important lesson for the contemporary church, especially in Africa.

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