



KEYNOTE

African Theological Education: Retrospect *and* Prospect — *An Anglophone Perspective*¹

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Abstract

Christian theological thinking and vocation has a long and illustrious history on the African continent, dating back to prominent theologians in Roman North Africa and Egypt. To appraise the *prospects* of theological education in Africa against its complicated and fraught background, I will discuss two issues of primary importance: 1) the need for theological education (programs, research, and institutions) to deeply engage African realities and context; and 2) why overcoming the debilitating effects of captivity to the Western theological/intellectual tradition will be Africa's greatest gift to the global church. These issues are *primary* because they will largely define or determine the prospects of African theological education for the next generation and beyond.

Résumé

« L'enseignement théologique africain : Rétrospective et perspectives — Une perspective anglophone »

La pensée et la vocation théologiques chrétiennes ont une longue et illustre histoire sur le continent africain, qui remonte à d'éminents théologiens de l'Afrique du Nord romaine et de l'Égypte. Pour évaluer les perspectives de l'enseignement théologique en Afrique dans ce contexte compliqué et difficile, j'aborderai deux questions de première importance : 1) la nécessité pour l'enseignement théologique (programmes, recherche et institutions) de s'engager profondément dans les réalités et le contexte africains ; et 2) la raison pour laquelle surmonter les effets débilissants de la captivité à l'égard de la tradition théologique/intellectuelle occidentale sera le plus grand don de l'Afrique à l'Église mondiale. Ces questions sont primordiales car elles définiront

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented as a keynote address on 26 September 2023 at ACTEA's General Assembly (25–29 September 2023) in Nairobi, Kenya.

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ou détermineront en grande partie les perspectives de l'enseignement théologique africain pour la prochaine génération et au-delà.

Resumo

“Educação Teológica Africana: Retrospectiva e Perspectiva — Um ponto de visita anglófono”

O pensamento e a vocação teológicos cristãos têm uma longa e ilustre história no continente africano, que remonta a teólogos proeminentes do Norte de África romano e do Egípto. Para avaliar as perspectivas da educação teológica em África, tendo em conta o seu contexto complicado e cheio de problemas, discutirei duas questões de importância primordial: 1) a necessidade de a educação teológica (programas, pesquisa e instituições) se envolver profundamente nas realidades e no contexto africanos; e 2) a razão pela qual a superação dos efeitos debilitantes do cativeiro da tradição teológica/intelectual ocidental será a maior dádiva de África à igreja global. Estas questões são primordiais porque, em grande medida, definirão ou determinarão as perspectivas da educação teológica africana para a próxima geração e para além dela.

Keywords

Western missions, Fourah Bay College, Western intellectual tradition, reformation, curriculum, global, colonial, Christian missions, black Atlantic, missionary schools, transatlantic, African church, indigenous, higher education, religion, context

Mots-clés

missions occidentales, Fourah Bay College, tradition intellectuelle occidentale, réforme, programme d'études, global, colonial, missions chrétiennes, Atlantique noir, écoles missionnaires, transatlantique, église africaine, indigène, enseignement supérieur, religion, contexte

Palavras-chave

Missões orientações, a Faculdade Fourah Bay, tradição intelectual do oriente, reformação, currículo, global, colonial, missões cristãs, Atlântica preta, escolas missionárias, transatlântico, igreja africana, indígena, educação do nível superior, religião, contexto

1. In Retrospect: A Journey of a Thousand Steps

Even the most cursory assessment confirms that Christian theological thinking and vocation has a long and illustrious history on the African continent. This history goes all the way back to the very beginnings of the Christian movement, to the large number of prominent theologians of the early church nurtured on African soil; these include Tertullian (160–240), Athanasius

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(c. 296 – 373), Origen (c. 185 – c. 253), Augustine (254–430), and others. These individuals founded theological institutions, established communities of Christian scholarship, and shaped theological enterprise — with an impact well beyond the Roman world. I often have to remind my own students that Augustine of Hippo was of African ancestry and that he made his towering theological contributions to the Church precisely *as* an African bishop wrestling with African problems. But the story of theology and religious education on the sub-continent² dates to the early nineteenth century and this process could be summarized with three broad observations from that colonial era.

a. African Agency: The Indispensability of the African Contribution

For more than a century and a half — from about 1800 — formal education in tropical Africa was primarily the domain of European missionary operations, especially in British colonies. By the early twentieth century, Western missions supplied at least 90% of all schools — from primary up to the tertiary level — in British colonies.³ The widespread acknowledgment of the role of Western missions in the building and expansion of schools often leads to the faulty assumption that the rise of education in Anglophone Africa depended entirely on foreign funds and European personnel.⁴ This is inaccurate. In fact, most of the work — of teaching and administrative leadership — in African schools was undertaken by Africans, not by foreign missionaries.⁵ Meaning that the growth of schools in colonial Africa was an African endeavor — indeed, some schools were founded by Africans themselves — not to mention that the lion’s share of the funding was local, as operational costs were primarily borne by African converts.⁶

So, in *retrospect*, like the establishment and spread of Christianity in (colonial) Africa, “mission school expansion was more of an African, rather than

² I.e., sub-Saharan Africa excluding Ethiopia and Eritrea.

³ Brian Stanley, “Twentieth Century Christianity: A Perspective from the History of Missions,” 65.

⁴ Ewout Frankema, “The Origins of Formal Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Was British Rule More Benign?” 340; Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 349.

⁵ The first grammar school established on the continent (in 1845) by the Church Missionary Society had an African tutor from the beginning; see Jehu J. Hanciles, *Euthanasia of a Mission: African Church Autonomy in a Colonial Context*, 66–68.

⁶ Frankema, “The Origins of Formal Education in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 341. The Sierra Leone Grammar School, for instance (the first in Africa), became self-sufficient — i.e., free from mission support — within two decades after it was founded; Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, 237, 327.

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a Western undertaking.”⁷ Both were more of an African, rather than a Western, undertaking. African contribution and agency were vital for the educational production that boosted the growth of the African church. And this recognition is especially crucial at a time when severe shortage of human and material resources is one of the most conspicuous blights on the African theological education landscape.

b. Theology in Service to the Church

Sierra Leone, my country of birth and home to the first Christian settlement established by Protestant missions on the continent, epitomized the intimate link between mission and education — including theological education — in British colonial Africa. By the 1820s, there were more African Christians in Sierra Leone than the rest of the subcontinent put together. By the mid nineteenth century, the level of school enrollment in this small British colony was the highest in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the percentage of children in school in Sierra Leone was higher than the case in England at the time.

Sierra Leone became home to earliest center of theological education in tropical Africa. It was here that Fourah Bay College (FBC), which started life as an institution for advanced technical training and religious education in 1827, was established. FBC had a troubled existence but became a training center for African clergy and African teachers, and supplied a significant number of the African agents who became missionaries in West Africa and beyond. It also functioned as an important linguistic center where the Bible was translated into various African languages and, by the 1870s, was offering degrees in Arts and Divinity.



Seal of Fourah Bay
College

FBC exemplified in two ways the transformation potential of theological training when programs combine academic excellence with service to the Church. First and foremost, the institution was designed as an instrument of local empowerment, built on the assumption that African students “could and should attain learning that met the same standards as their English sponsors.”⁸ For much of the nineteenth century, FBC was the premier breeding ground of Africans in church and society whose intellectual stature and accomplishments exposed the myth of white supremacy.

⁷ Frankema, “The Origins of Formal Education in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 341. He notes that “[between] 1903 and 1925, seven out of eight official staff members in the Protestant missions were African,” 340.

⁸ Joel A. Carpenter, “To Be Agents of a Life-Giving Transformation: Christian Higher Education in Africa with Response,” 4.

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There are many examples of these individuals. Perhaps the best known is Bishop Ajayi Crowther (c. 1809–1891), the preeminent African Christian of the nineteenth century and a product of FBC, who so impressed a Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge that the professor’s doubts about the mental capacity of the “Negro” were demolished.⁹ There was also James Africanus Horton (1835–1883). He took on the name *Africanus* long before we started talking about decolonizing religion or the curricula. After graduating from FBC, he became the first African graduate of Edinburgh University, qualified as a medical doctor at the age of twenty-four, and became a leading champion of African self-government. Institutions of higher education like Fourah Bay College reflected a belief in African potential and demonstrated the indispensability of African gifts and contributions for the building of the African Church.

Second, FBC benefitted from the *transatlantic/global* currents — cultural and intellectual — of which European missions were only a part. This made it a potent site of innovation and social transformation beyond European assumptions. Among other things, it appointed its first black principal in Rev. Edward Jones (180–1865), a leading black Christian who had emigrated from emigrated from South Carolina. As a leading black educator, Jones exercised profound influence on the first generation of African pastors who took their place alongside (and eventually replaced) European missionaries in positions of leadership in the Anglican church in West Africa.¹⁰ As Andrew Walls once observed, we often forget that it was in the churches that “Africans first took leadership and managed modern institutions before such experience was widely accessible elsewhere in the colonial state.”¹¹

c. *Theological Education, Globalization, and Liberation*

By the early twentieth century, the British empire included more than a quarter of the world’s population and claimed more colonies on the African continent than any other European power. The collusion between Christian missions and British empire-building in Africa is a historical fact. But more relevant is the fact that missionary monopoly of education served both the cause of mission and the needs of empire. Throughout colonial Africa, Western education was the primary tool for the spread of European models and cultural values. Much critique has focused on the corrosive impact of this process, in which Christian missions played a leading role, on African cultures. But it also helped to embed African churches and societies more fully within the global

⁹ Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop: Samuel Adjai Crowther* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 71.

¹⁰ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Euthanasia of a Mission: African Church Autonomy in a Colonial Context*, 96–103.

¹¹ Andrew F. Walls, “Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect,” 106.

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order. The unprecedented transformation of African societies by these Western projects cannot be denied. To this day, the notion that African Christianity is a product of colonial imposition, and a pale imitation of Western forms, remains surprisingly widespread. But it is important to note that Africans usually converted to Christianity for *African* reasons, and that the vast majority of Africans (in the colonial era) had only minimal exposure to a white missionary.¹²

More to the point, the extensive transatlantic movements and ideological streams associated with black Christians of the diaspora were arguably more decisive in the beginning; a focus on Western initiatives tends to obscure this important fact. Indeed, in retrospect, this black Atlantic movement was crucial for the foundation of the African Church and the formation of Christianity as an African religion.¹³ It also contributed immensely to African theological training. Black Christian emigrants (from the US) not only established the earliest churches still in existence on the sub-continent today,¹⁴ many were also leading educators who led the earliest calls for African churches shaped by indigenous resources and compatible with the African cultural heritage.¹⁵ This also included calls in 1874 (a century and a half ago) for the establishment of an African University in West Africa.¹⁶ A similar impact emerged in South Africa where, in addition to the establishment of training institutions for African leaders and communities, black Christians in African church movements were effective in subverting white control in churches. So much so that the British colonial authorities (in South Africa) eventually placed travel bans on black Americans in the early twentieth century.¹⁷ These transatlantic alliances and interactions between Africans and black American leaders — which lasted into the twentieth century — impacted theological training and ministry in important ways and provide crucial and interesting lessons for our present context.

2. Theological Education in the Midst of Historic Change

This retrospective view of African theological education demonstrated that

¹² Richard Gray, *Black Christians and White Missionaries*, 65.

¹³ E.g., see Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877–1900*.

¹⁴ See Sylvia M. Jacobs, “The Historical Role of Afro-Americans in American Missionary Efforts in Africa,” 17.

¹⁵ Including Edward Jones (1807–1865) in Sierra Leone, Alexander Crummell (1819–1898), a prominent black missionary and educator in Liberia, and Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912) of Liberia, whose long and distinguished career that encompassed the roles of Presbyterian clergyman, educator, diplomat, and statesman.

¹⁶ Hanciles, *Euthanasia of a Mission*, 157, 168–169.

¹⁷ Edward Wilmot Blyden, *Black Spokesman: Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, 187–189.

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not even the travails and predicaments of colonialism neutralized the impact and contribution of African agents and elements. In my view, three historic developments in the final decades of the twentieth century are critical for our evaluation of theological education in Africa today.

a. The End of Colonial Rule: The Boom (and Bust?) in Higher Education

By the 1950s, graduates from mission schools and Christian institutions of higher education increasingly monopolized employment in the modern sectors and urban centers of the colonial state. Many of the political leaders who emerged at the dawn of the post-colonial African state had received a Christian education. With political independence, the story of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa changed even more dramatically.¹⁸ In the early 1960s, there were only 41 institutions of higher education (with 16,500 students) “in all of Africa.”¹⁹ By 2010, there were 5.2 million students enrolled in higher education institutions in sub-Saharan Africa—the vast majority of which were government-run. But the political turmoil and unrelenting socio-economic crises afflicting many African nations occasioned severe cuts in education funding at all levels. By the 1990s, writes Carpenter, “even the finest African universities were in crisis,”²⁰ at a time when unprecedented growth in secondary education was generating a massive and growing demand for tertiary education.

b. The Multiplicity and Diversity of Theological Training

All this had far-reaching implications for African theological training institutions and initiatives which now operate in an environment in which governments have asserted greater control of the resources of higher education and increasingly imposed regulations and policies designed to maximize enrollment and contribution to national development. By 2017, there were close to 1,500 (estimated 1,468) pastoral programs and theological schools across Africa — up from less than 100 (perhaps 70 to 80) in 1950.²¹ From the 1980s, also, there has been a significant rise in the number of private Christian universities on the continent — many founded by Pentecostal-Charismatic ministries. By 1999 there were thirty-one private Christian institutions in Nigeria and seventeen in Kenya. But this expansion lags well behind the extraordinary demand.

¹⁸ Few have tracked these developments more insightfully than Joel A. Carpenter. Among his writings, see “New Evangelical Universities: Cogs in World System, or Players in a New Game?,” “To Be Agents of a Life-Giving Transformation: Christian Higher Education in Africa;” and “Christian Universities Grow in Africa.”

¹⁹ Carpenter, “New Evangelical Universities,” 5.

²⁰ Carpenter, “Christian Universities Grow in Africa,” 25.

²¹ Carpenter, “Christian Universities Grow in Africa,” 25–26

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c. *Africa's Emergence as a Heartland of Global Christianity*

However, few factors in recent decades have had a greater impact on theological education and training in Africa than the exponential growth of African Christianity. The basic facts are now a commonplace. Christianity has emerged as the largest religion in Africa, and its rate of growth in the sub-continent over the past century is also unparalleled in the history of the faith. Between 1970 and 2000, “every Christian family grew faster in Africa than in other continents”²² and, by 2010, the share of the population that is Christian in sub-Saharan Africa had climbed from 9% (in 1910) to 63%.²³ By one estimate, the continent now accounts for an estimated 25% of the world’s Christians—compared to 11% in North America.²⁴ Alas, the unparalleled growth in Christian churches, movements, and communities completely outpaced theological training resources. There are few areas of more urgent need within African Christianity than resources for theological training, reflection, and engagement.

The situation reflects a daunting paradox in African theological education. Sizeable expansion of theological institutions and programs, coupled with a significant increase in academic vitality and theological production by leading African theologians for two generations, is juxtaposed with the painful deficits such that theological education in Africa remains in a state of perennial crises and disarray, with few bright spots.²⁵ A state of affairs pithily, if somewhat unkindly, summarized by the common view that the Africa Church is “a giant standing on the ‘clay legs’ of its” theological education institutions.²⁶

3. The Case for Reformation

There is no shortage of diagnostic analysis. But recent assessments have extended the conversation beyond the myriad socio-economic handicaps that perpetually undermine academic enterprise and institution building to new focus on the *intrinsic deficiencies* within training programs and academic structures themselves, with regards curricula, educational vision, methodologies, contextual relevance, conceptualization, etc. This shift of perspective is vital for a meaningful assessment of the *prospects* facing African theological education. But the endemic nature of the problem and the seriousness of the crisis means that a reformation of African theological

²² Gina A. Zurlo, *Global Christianity: A Guide to the World's Largest Religion from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe*, 7.

²³ Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population*, 10.

²⁴ Zurlo, *Global Christianity*, 3.

²⁵ See Christopher D. Howles, “A Giant on Clay Legs? African Theological Education and the Formation of Missiocentric, Missionary-Sending Church Leaders.”

²⁶ Christopher D. Howles, “A Giant on Clay Legs?,” 5.

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education is needed for the prospects of theological education in Africa to alter significantly. In this regard, *two interrelated areas need urgent attention.*

a. *The Disconnect from African Realities*

The strength and gravity of this issue is better demonstrated than described. The three brief accounts which follow — all related to the disease outbreaks — powerfully illustrate the predicament in need of attention.

Narrative 1

In 1918, the influenza pandemic — the deadliest in history (at that point) — infected an estimated 500 million people worldwide, roughly one-third of the planet's population. By the time it subsided, it had claimed an estimated 20-50 million victims.²⁷ It is not well known that sub-Saharan Africa “suffered the highest average mortality rate of any continent in the pandemic.” Some 2.4 million people (nearly 2% of the continent's population) died within 6 months.²⁸

Those readers familiar with the history of African Christianity will recall that the ravages of the pandemic pushed traditional societies to breaking point and transformed the religious landscape. Between 1918 and 1921, a wave of new religious movements spontaneously emerged in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The dynamism, popularity and rapid growth of these movements astounded colonial authorities and took existing Christian denominations by surprise. Most important for our purposes, there is scant indication that these prophet-healing movements — or African Independent Churches, as they became known — received any attention in theological institutions or programs. Even though they demonstrated the potent interconnection between disease epidemics and religiosity in African societies. Serious academic or theological examination of their significance came much later, in the 1960s; and initially from European, not African, scholars.²⁹ Yet, by the 1980s, adherents of these AIC churches represented 12% of the total African Christian population.³⁰

²⁷ History.com editors, “Spanish Flu.”

²⁸ Howard Phillips, “Influenza Pandemic (Africa).” Phillips records that the “some 50 million” in Africa who died “were disproportionately those aged between eighteen and forty.”

²⁹ E.g., Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets of South Africa* (1948); Frederick Burkewood Welbourn, *East African Rebels: A Study of Some Independent Churches* (1961); Frederick Burkewood Welbourn and Bethwell A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home: A Study of Two Independent Churches in Western Kenya* (1966); and Harold W. Turner's 2-volume *History of an African Independent Church* (1967).

³⁰ Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century*, 7.

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Narrative 2

Between 1980 and 2000, the HIV/AIDS virus affected 40 million people worldwide and claimed at least 22 million lives.³¹ Africa, which emerged as the epicenter of the epidemic, accounted for 71% of infections.³² Yet, African theologians and biblical scholars in schools and universities throughout the continent who were only too eager to engage Western thought and remained wedded to Western theological discourse, demonstrated scant awareness of the fact that the devastation crises unfolding around them called for urgent theological reflection. With rare exception, those tasked with training church leaders and preparing a new generation for ministry in the African context and remained “theologically” disengaged from the realities around then. This was even more astounding given the fact that many of these same African theological educators lived among communities devastated by the pandemic and witnessed firsthand how the disease impacted students in their classrooms. Yet their teaching, publications, research agenda and theological reflections remained unchanged.

Narrative 3

In 2013, the Ebola outbreak, one of the deadliest disease epidemics in recent memory, began in a small village in Guinea and spread to neighboring Sierra Leone and Liberia within months.³³ By 2016, the disease had spread to 7 more countries. It ultimately caused 11,325 deaths and rendered an estimated 30,000 children orphans.

More so than any disease epidemic on the continent, the Ebola outbreak was profoundly intertwined with religious life. Western public health experts were forced to concede the limitations of scientific solutions alone. Cultural practices (including normal forms of greeting), the prevalence of religious gathering, and spiritual practices all conspired to spread the disease. Most important, since victims were more contagious when dead than alive, burial practices and rituals became major sources of contagion. In essence, it was foolhardy to approach the catastrophe solely with scientific tools or medical resources. Successful containment required cultural intelligence, understanding of religious beliefs, and close collaboration with local religious authorities.

Once again, amid a situation which raised profound religious questions and called for urgent theological engagement, trained theologians and religious specialists on the continent were mainly silent. In the face of public health crises,

³¹ Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, “World Christianity 2023: A Gendered Approach,” 3.

³² As of 2018, Africa still accounted for two-thirds of new HIV infections. Ayesha B. M. Kharsany and Quarraisha A. Karim, “HIV Infection and AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa: Current Status, Challenges and Opportunities.”

³³ “2014–2016 Ebola Outbreak in West Africa.”

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social upheaval, and immense suffering, the theological educators and programs purportedly designed to equip pastors and religious leaders for ministry in the African context were missing in action. There was little to demonstrate that these programs or systems of theological training functioned as vital source for the critical tools or resources that African churches and religious communities needed in their effort to cope with the unfolding calamity — notably one in which religious practice and spiritual views were implicated.

There can be no question that disease epidemics invariably bring to the fore pressing issues and questions within religious communities and the wider society which invite urgent theological responses. These include agonizing questions related to human suffering, healing and wholeness, the links between entrenched social injustice and public catastrophe, and even how the African understanding of evil can both inform a biblical spirituality and also generate bad theology with real-world effects.³⁴

The silence and disengagement manifest throughout the theological education landscape made rare instances of meaningful theological response particularly evocative and resounding. One such example was Botswanan biblical studies scholar Musa Dube, for whom experiencing the devastation of the HIV epidemic precipitated a breakthrough in her theological calling and a reorientation of her theological commitments. In her book, *The HIV & AIDS Bible* (2008), she tells the story of her transformation from “being exclusively academic” to becoming a public theologian fully engaged with the community beyond the academy. She was also equally forthcoming about the failure of the African theological establishment to respond. As she put it,

*For me what is tragic is not that . . . HIV/AIDS has cruelly presented us with a framed picture of our shattered dreams, nor that HIV/AIDS has transformed our future into a raging river we must cross without a bridge. Rather what I find tragic is that [theologians and religious studies scholars] . . . are stunned and stoned into silence.*³⁵

Ultimately, this critique of theological “silence” is not just about public health calamities. It is rather a commentary on theological disengagement with the Africa context generally. And the issue extends beyond public health calamities. In addition to outbreaks of deadly disease, African societies are routinely afflicted by other deadly epidemics (of political violence, economic hardship, political oppression, injustice, corruption, lawlessness, etc.) that also cry out for deep theological application.

³⁴ Such bad theology includes ideas that link catastrophe to divine judgement or insist that faith confers immunity to infection. See Christo Greyling, “A Discussion with Christo Greyling, Director of Faith Partnerships for Development at World Vision.”

³⁵ Musa W. Dube, *The HIV & AIDS Bible: Selected Essays*, 34; emphasis added.

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b. Captivity to the Western Intellectual Tradition

There are many possible explanations as to why African theological education and research is poorly engaged with African realities. Throughout the continent, the design and structure of theological programs and curricula content are faithful recreations/pale imitations of Western forms. This state of affairs reflects the endurance of colonial designs, despite the post-independent transitions mentioned above, as well as the inequities of economic globalization. But, more crucially, it is sustained and reinforced by a steady stream of African theologians and scholars who are trained in the West or whose education is Western based.³⁶ These factors have served to entrench captivity to the Western intellectual tradition in African theological institutions/centers and theological program at all levels. Sadly, even Western scholars have noticed the pervasive tendency for African theologians to overlook the critical issues of their own contexts. In 2008, the editors of the *Global Dictionary of Theology* expressed surprised at

the number of scholars from the Global South who tended to do theology in the manner of their Northern teachers . . . [that] entries drafted by theologians from Asia, Africa, and Latin America did not differ significantly from entries that would have been written by their European or North American counterparts This situation raised the critical question: who is going to do authentically Asian, African or Hispanic theology if not scholars from those particular locations . . . ? It is clear that the theological academy has some way to go in educating a generation of theologians who will take their contexts seriously.³⁷

Fifteen years (and a generation?) later, those expecting to see changes across the African theological landscape that reflect a constructive response to this tacit rebuke will be disappointed. As Christopher Howles observed recently, “theological education [has been] replicated across Africa in the image of North Atlantic forms, methods, epistemologies, and theologies, leaving them fragmented and dis-integrated, deprived of well-functioning contextualized theological traditions.”³⁸ Musa Dube, another vocal critic of African theological education, puts it more forcefully:

One finds that in many African institutions, the theological formation of students is based on western theology — *a theology*

³⁶ Dube, *The HIV & AIDS Bible*, 42.

³⁷ William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Introduction,” *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, xi.

³⁸ Howles, “A Giant on Clay Legs?,” 8.

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that . . . has no immediate, obvious, or direct relevance for the African context . . .

Such formation has unfortunately given rise to a *socially divorced theological education*, an educational consciousness that hardly has anything to say about the presence, activity, and will of God in particular African contexts. Such theological formation has often produced stillborn church leaders and scholars, whose *theological voice is nonexistent*.³⁹

Such blunt insider assessments are sobering. To take them seriously is to understand why the call for reformation is long overdue. Fortunately, the shoots of reform are already manifest in notable instances of institutional innovation and academic scholarship. In the case of the former, the most obvious and outstanding example is the Accra-based *Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, & Culture* (ACI) founded in 1998 by eminent African theologian, Kwame Bediako (1945–2008). ACI’s program of theological education was built from scratch with the specific aim of equipping students for ministry and deep engagement in the African context, in a way that fosters research freed from captivity to Western norms and theological models.⁴⁰ With close to 800 graduates, ACI reflects a vision that shines brightly on the African theological education landscape because of its pioneering quality. Additionally, in the past 4–5 decades, Africa has produced many outstanding theologians who have challenged dominant Western norms (often enshrined in the myth of normativity), pioneered new concepts/constructs that have added powerful intellectual currents to the global discourse, and championed fresh approaches that celebrated the African heritage and experience.

Regrettably, the pioneering efforts of a relatively tiny number of theological programs and African scholars (at home and abroad) accentuate rather than ameliorate the extent and severity of the problem. In fact, institutions and scholars on the frontiers of change and innovation are the first to acknowledge the formidable nature of the challenge. The truth of the matter is that our captivity to the Western intellectual tradition is debilitating and suffocating. Western theological education has great value and can be adapted to the needs of Christian communities globally. But Western “systematic” theology, like any other body of theological discourse, is heavily contextual and ethnocentric.⁴¹ It

³⁹ Dube, *The HIV & AIDS Bible*, 42–43; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ For the story of Bediako’s founding of ACI, see Joel A. Carpenter, “Kwame Bediako, Promoter of African Christian Thought,” pages 100–120 in this issue. — *the editors*

⁴¹ Even if the nature and objectives of Western theological education are constantly debated — see Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, “World Christianity 2023: A Gendered Approach.”

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is designed to promote knowledge of (and expertise in) issues or topics pertaining to the Western world — along with the language requirements.

Ending captivity to Western norms must start with the recognition that, adopted wholesale and uncritically, Western-oriented training forestalls meaningful theological exploration in Africa and undermines the research agenda needed to refresh theological training and the theological curriculum. The nature and extent of the restructuring and reconceptualization require can be paralyzing. But some aspects are more obvious than others. Two are worth mentioning. First, the deep separation between the disciplines of theology and religious studies that prevails in Western institutions has no place within African theological education. Second, because Western theological training is inextricably tied to the discipline of philosophy, its approach is heavily textual and — like philosophy — lines of inquiry are typically focused on the authority of certain texts.⁴² In both cases, the Western paradigm leaves African theologians with a significant handicap for research in African contexts, because training precludes the scientific study of human society and engagement with lived religion. In essence, new approaches require significant methodological reorientation.

It is important to emphasize that much of the material that informs African theological reflection (and religious engagement) is embedded in social, economic, and political realities. From an African perspective, theological reflection just for its own sake, removed from the travails and demands of human society or inattentive to rapidly changing realities, is an absurdity. Over decades ago, South African missiologist David Bosch explained that one of the most exciting things about African theology is that it must be done on the “frontiers.” He explained that

Africans are doing theology because they are compelled to. They are doing theology on the *frontiers*, where there are many dangers, where ambushes await one and where one can easily take a wrong turn. It is, however, precisely because of these *dangers* that their theologizing is so exciting and so worthwhile.⁴³

Bosch’s assessment remains true. Doing theology in African contexts is not for the faith-hearted or for anyone content to stay at a safe distance. It requires commitment to Bulawayo, not Berlin! It requires commitment to Nairobi, not New York; commitment to Accra, not Atlanta.⁴⁴ It calls for attention to the complex and volatile developments that shape and transform African societies.

⁴² Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing, “World Christianity 2023: A Gendered Approach,” 13.

⁴³ David J. Bosch, “Missionary Theology in Africa,” 16; emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Bulawayo is Zambia’s second largest city; Nairobi is the capital and largest city of Kenya; Accra is the capital and largest city of Ghana; Berlin is the capital and largest city of Germany; New York is the largest city in the USA; Atlanta, Georgia, USA is home to the influential Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). — *the editors*

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To be effective, in other words, African theology (broadly understood) must be socially conscious, radically innovative, and publicly engaged. This demands interdisciplinary approaches, methods, and strategies; and for many theological training institutions, this will mean building programs from scratch — as ACI has successfully done.

My call for *reformation* reflects the fact that the prospects for theological education in Africa are inextricably tied to formidable predicaments that must be confronted and overcome. It is also based on the recognition that African Christianity or the African Church finds itself in a historical moment of global significance. Over 20 years ago, my mentor (the late Andrew Walls), made the remarkable claim that “anyone who wishes to undertake serious study of Christianity these days needs to know something of Africa.”⁴⁵ This can be interpreted in a number of ways. At the very least, it conveys the provocative insight that African Christianity matters greatly — (in global financial parlance) it is too big to fail! — and that the nature and quality of African theological production will increasingly have great implications for the worldwide church.

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⁴⁵ Andrew F. Walls, “Eusebius Tries Again: Reconceiving the Study of Christian History,” 106.

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