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Towards an Anticolonial Agenda for Decolonising Theological Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

As conceptualised (in text and curriculum outcomes) and actualised in practice (teaching and learning), theological education in sub-Saharan Africa remains a manifestation of the missionary/colonial project, existing in a socio-religious and political context where normative religions (e.g. Christianity) still reign supreme at the expense of the minoritised religious ‘other’ and other contentious narratives. Despite claims of political and religious agency in social space in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa (through the emergence of indigenous leadership), and indeed venter of paradigm shift in including ‘new theologies (see Matemba, 2011; Amanze, 2009), there remains vestiges of coloniality in theological education in sub-Saharan Africa. I argue that theological education in sub-Saharan Africa has been unable to disentangle itself from the shackles of coloniality due to the reluctance or indeed inability of those offering theological education to undertake radical decolonial reforms in the discipline, partly because many are themselves perhaps “caged [in] a neo/colonial mindset” (Nyoni, 2019, 4). As decolonisation voices in the academy have gained traction, important questions are being raised not only if theological education should (continue to) go through this important process but indeed how far decolonial changes should go if the discipline is to be aligned with the contemporary realities and other freedoms promised in the new African postcolonial settlement. In this presentation I attempt to open ‘new’ dialogue on how an anticolonial (as opposed to well-known postcolonial) approach can provide conceptual tools to challenge coloniality (in its various guises). The presentation also provides decolonial strategies for theological education in sub-Saharan Africa and suggest what can be done to ameliorate the problem.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Theological Education, Anticolonial framework, Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

In this presentation, I focus on sub-Saharan Africa in my attempt to respond to the conference theme on decolonising the theological curriculum in an Online Age. Decolonisation here being understood as a critical component in postcolonial discourse. The concept ‘Online Age’ is a characteristic of the Information Age - that is rapid technological advancement, including online learning. In sub-Saharan Africa, this development has been precipitated to a large extent by the Covid-19 health crisis that has disrupted traditional approaches to learning and forcing education to go online. Knoetze (2021) has noted how “online teaching forces faculties to move from a previously more instructivist pedagogy in face-to-face teaching to a current more socio-constructivist pedagogy in the onlinem environment” (5). How has online learning addressed (or not) contextualisation issues in theological education? By doing theological education in an Online Age, has anything changed towards decolonial understanding of theology and the

issues it attempts to raise? The sudden diversion to online learning has laid bare technological unpreparedness and assumptions regarding students' access to online learning, for example.

The cold reality is that particularly in developing regions like sub-Saharan Africa access to online education has been hampered by a number of predictable factors. Lack of internet connection (let alone access to high speed connection necessary to study successfully online in higher education). Low income status for the majority of students and therefore unable to purchase appropriate gadgets and buy internet data. Intermittent electricity and in most cases students living in homes in the village that have no electricity or any modern amenities. Lack of access to reputable study materials such as published papers and books that require hefty payment to access online from publishers. Teachers' rudimentary understanding of effective pedagogies in delivering teaching online. The diversion to online learning has challenged traditional pedagogies (how we teaching) away from dependence on old 'boring' books with their unchallenged knowledge. To provide the guide for issues raised in this presentation, the following questions are helpful:

1. Despite some responses to globalisation and Africanisation, why is theological education in sub-Saharan Africa *still* in a 'colonised' formulation? How can an anticolonial approach empower practitioners to challenge the status quo?
2. Why, for example, is the conceptualisation 'African Christianity' unhelpful and therefore an impediment to the decolonisation of 'Christian' theological education in sub-Saharan Africa?
3. In what ways can an anticolonial framework facilitate the disruption of vestiges of coloniality in theological education in sub-Saharan Africa?
4. What decolonial strategies 'cooked in an anticolonial pot' can be suggested for theological education in sub-Saharan Africa?

The presentation covers the following issues. First, it provides the background and context for the discussion related to theological education in an Age of Knowledge. Secondly, key concepts in postcolonial discourse are articulated, on to discussions about the colonial legacy in theological education in sub-Saharan Africa. This is followed by critical discussions on why theological education in sub-Saharan Africa remains largely in a 'colonised' formulation. Another issue examined relates to the misconceptualisation of the term 'African Christianity' and why such a categorisation is unhelpful in the drive to decolonise theological education in sub-Saharan Africa. Next, an anticolonial framework is discussed and suggested as necessary for radical action towards a paradigm shift in theological education in sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, decolonial strategies for theological education in sub-Saharan Africa are suggested.

Background and context

Understanding and doing theology in an Age of Knowledge

The Age of Knowledge has been precipitated by technological advancement that exposes theologians and their students to different kinds of knowledge and interpretations of that knowledge. By 'Age of Knowledge' I mean a time in human history experiencing critical transformations in knowledge-production and dissemination. How 'traditional' disciplines such as theology are impacted (or not) by such advances in knowledge production and technology, is an important point worth considering. Evidently, the transformations and availability of different kinds of knowledge have affected not only how society understands theology but also how the academy does theology.

In many ways the Age of Knowledge has forced theology to express itself in different ways, including how it has (or not) benefitted from advances in knowledge-production and

dissemination, and the extent to which theology has been subjected to critical reflection in the academy. This also brings to question aspects of theological knowledge that can (or should) be challenged and indeed those to be ‘decolonised’ in the dynamic between theology as ‘theoretically expressed ... [and] ... practically lived...’ (Mugambi, 1994, 7)? My argument is that doing theology in an Age of Knowledge should provide critical understandings on how believers ‘live’ (or expected to live) their theology and also for the benefit of others. Putting it differently, ‘doing’ theology should also demonstrate how people of faith are enlivened and spiritually strengthened by that experience.

Challenges to theology as ‘traditional knowledge’ in an Age of Knowledge

As knowledge has become more accessible in the Information Age (of course to those who can access it), different perspectives and interpretations, including unverifiable and dangerous (e.g. ‘fake’ news or conspiracy theories – does Covid-19 come to mind, anyone?) emerge to challenge or even question aspects of knowledge existing in traditional disciplines such as theology. A more worrying concern for theological education is its very existence in the academy on the basis that is non-performative knowledge that cannot be put out for sale – that is, it does not have a performative value on the knowledge market in the digitalised society (Matemba and Addai-Mununkum, 2021). In countries like the UK, theology as an academic discipline in the academy is under serious danger of being discontinued (if not already) altogether in some universities, fulfilling perhaps Gavin D’Costa’s 1996 ominous prediction in his article entitled “The End of ‘Theology’ and ‘Religious Studies at UK Universities” (D’Costa, 1996). Subjecting theology to critical reflection in an Age of Knowledge can antagonise others and invoke fierce response in societies (like sub-Saharan Africa) where to a large extent theology remains a lived and welcome experience for many people.

Response of Theological Education in the Age of Knowledge in sub-Saharan Africa

Pressures of globalisation on theological education

Response to and inclusion of gender, environmental, ecumenical, religious pluralism, human rights and other relevant discourses in the theological curriculum. Although questions must still be asked as the extent to which theological education engages (or not) with uncomfortable conversations about race, slavery, sexual orientation, sexual predatory behaviour (by priests and others) and abuse of girls, boys and women in the church, and other such painful issues.

African interpretations and expressions of theology towards mission

Inclusion of African indigenous religions and their theologies in theological education not merely as ‘additional’ but as areas of serious academic engagement (Mugambi, 1994; Amanze, 1998a). Secondly, inclusion of African Independent (Instituted) Churches in theological education not merely for vilification and ‘othering’ (Mijoga, 2000), but as an example of how some Africans have indigenised the church in Africa “... to make it relevant to the Africans in all aspects of their lives ...” (Amanze, 1998b, 62).

Key concepts in postcolonial discourse

Here I present the concepts into two main categorisations: first, coloniality and then post coloniality, with the latter including different sub-concepts that have emerged in the rich discourse.

Coloniality/colonialism

State of being colonised related to the practices and legacies of European colonialism in social orders and forms of knowledge (Mignolo, 2000). Epistemic hegemony related to a history of epistemic violence that is present in every geographical location, including the West (see

Mignolo, 2007). Power ('coloniality of power'), privilege, and powerlessness in the context of racialized politics of historical colonisation through imperial power and subjugation. An epistemological frame bound to the European colonial project related to forms of exploitation and domination (power). Related to the marginality of 'others' ways of knowing by a hegemonic (forced) epistemology of the coloniser on the colonised. "... [The unenviable] actions of silencing or relegating other epistemologies to a barbarian margins, a primitive past ... [ascribing it as] evil" (Mignolo, 2007, 162). Modernity seen as a "...rhetoric of salvation [while hiding] coloniality, which is the logic of oppression and exploitation" Mignolo, 2007, 162).

Postcoloniality/postcolonialism

This relates or describes political and cultural condition of a postcolonial society (Mignolo, 2007). A state of affairs after colonialism (in the classic sense) has ended and indigenous peoples have regained their political freedom and under their own leaders and institutions.

1. Neocoloniality/neocolonialism

This relates to new forms of coloniality. Although colonialism in the classic sense is not physically present, colonial hegemonic influence is indirectly present in formerly colonised countries. This hegemony exists through economics, politics, education and other global forces and pressures that continue to exert the influence of former colonial powers on formerly colonised peoples and places (Spivak, 1991). A condition which although nations are supposedly 'free' and yet religious, political and other elites continue to work as 'agents' of the colonial project (wilfully or not) by their actions (or lack) that perpetuates coloniality (instead of challenging it) and begging the question whether the West is still colonising Africa, which it is doing (Matemba, 2021; Kaoma, 2012). This situation is exacerbated to a large extent by a dependency culture on Western materialism and social, educational and economic structures and patterns instead of challenging them and doing their own unique things African, like what Asia has done for itself (see Clapham, 2020; Matemba and Lilemba, 2015).

2. Decoloniality/decolonisation

Decoloniality is not only a long-standing political and epistemological movement aimed at liberation of previously colonized peoples from global coloniality but also a different way of thinking, knowing, and doing in challenging coloniality. Decoloniality as an epistemological and political movement advances decoloniality as a necessary liberatory language of the future for Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Decoloniality is about the undoing of the coloniality that still exists within the 'underlying structures of oppression and injustice' (Heleta 2016, 1). It is also about "... decentring of European knowledge ... [to restore] the place of the African and African knowledge at the heart of how we come to know ..." (Jansen cited in Mathebula, 2019, 8). Decolonisation is "... about a democratic open-endedness to knowledge and otherness without being restricted and governed by surreptitious categorisations of what constitutes an epistemological regulative benchmark epistemology that serves as the basis for marginalising all otherness" (Manthalu and Waghid, 2019, 26).

3. Afrocoloniality/Afrocolonisation

Coloniality perpetuated by African governments and leaders on their people (Cossa, 2018). African Christian 'gatekeepers' inadvertently helping to maintain some form of coloniality in social space or indeed actively frustrating decolonising efforts in theological education (see Matemba, 2021).

4. Recoloniality/Recolonisation

In geo-politics when the return of “empire” as very much a current affair through military force or other forms of intervention by Western powers on formerly colonised nations/regions (e.g. Western military interventions in Iraq, the Middle East and Afghanistan from the mid-2000s) (Veracini, 2005). Despite promises of decolonization in the postcolonial present, actions and ideologies that suggest the return of colonisation as evidenced by the use of and adherence to and promotion of colonial-era laws and practices (e.g. neocoloniality) (see Subramanian, 2017). Re-emergence of the colonial through deploying rhetorics of “humanitarian intervention” and “inevitable necessity” while going to war/re-subjugate (e.g. the West back in Africa and Middle East) formerly colonised ‘others’ in colonial theatres and for colonial purposes (Lorenzo-Veracini, 2005).

Instruments and processes of decolonisation being “yet another instrument for time-honoured colonialist manoeuvres of discursively absencing, brutally exploiting and then completely forgetting [formerly colonised peoples and their needs] (Noxolo, 2017, 334). Relates to what is also called ‘false decoloniality’, illusions of liberation and myths of freedom which leaves the colonial project intact although people are in the postcolonial present (Kepe and Hall, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Power structures that control people – whether visible or invisible and whether by outsiders from formerly colonising nations or coloniality perpetuated by the political leadership from formerly colonised nations on its own people (e.g. Afrocoloniality) (see Cossa, 2018).

Theological Education in sub-Saharan Africa: A colonial legacy

Much has been debated on this subject and therefore no need rehash old arguments, except to highlight a few issues. Theological education as a product of the missionary enterprise, is itself an adjunct of the colonial project on “... the basis for acculturation into Western ways of life – the cultural heritage of those missionaries who came to evangelise African peoples ... [which] ... was a mistake” (Mugambi, 1994, ix). Historically, Western Christian theology which dominates theological education is an extension of coloniality in marginalising, dispossessing, dehumanising and disempowering colonised peoples in sub-Saharan Africa (Mbewe, 2018). Conrad Mbewe takes this issue further asserting that “many Christian missionaries shared the psychology of the colonisers. Such a psychology preserved privileges, defended discrimination and extended domination to such a degree that it amounted to the organisation of society on the principle of the enslavement of black people” (Mbewe, 2018, nd).

Although the colonial legacy (and the role of missionaries and Christianity in it) must be understood in its complexity, as Klaus Fiedler has asserted, it is worth noting that “missionary activity benefited from colonial rule, the missionaries were part and parcel of the colonial set up and shared much of its system of values and many of its tacit assumptions” (Fiedler, 1999, 17). The colonial legacy has continued somewhat into the postcolonial settlement “... transforming itself from (political) colonialism to (economic) legacy neocolonialism ... and the engine of neocolonialism needs spiritual lubrication as much as the exploitative machine of colonialism had needed it before ” (Fiedler, 1998, 220).

Why Theological Education remains (largely) in a ‘colonised’ formulation in sub-Saharan Africa

Despite rhetoric of decolonisation (i.e. responses to global forces and inculturation in some theological expressions, as we have seen), (see Mugambi, 1994; Amanze, 1998b), theological education in Sub-Saharan Africa remains to a large degree in a ‘colonised’ state. Why? Here, I provide some thoughts to explain this situation. Privileging the historical position of normative religions and heathenising non-normative religions (e.g. Indigenous/non-western religions). In sub-Saharan Africa relating to the Christian dominance (62.9%) on the region continues to sustain a Christian hegemony (based on Western/European/missionary construct)

in theological education in the academy (PEW, 2015). The ‘othering’ of non-normative religions means that a neo-confessional formulation of the theological curriculum as an extension of colonial project, is presented.

The tendency (still) of mission-based theological education (offered in seminaries and denominational higher education institutions) to malign other worldviews, (e.g. African Traditions) or to project such views from a Christian normative standpoint (Banda, 2019). Inward-looking and ‘gate-keeping’ tendencies by some theologians, and institutional administrators who only have orthodox intentions for theological education as ‘mission’ for proselytisation into their faith (see Fedorov, 2005). The reluctance or inability of African religious leaders (now in the postcolonial settlement) to rid theological education of its colonial/missionary hegemony remains a major concern. The failures of these leaders perpetuate “... the colonial exploitation with more sophisticated (neocolonial) methods” (Fielder, 1998, 220), and worryingly because many are in a “caged a neo/colonial mindset [and therefore not only unable to disrupt the status quo but unaware that they are part of the problem]” (Matemba, 2021, 34).

The Western missionary project through evangelism, charity work, and provision of education, including theological colleges, remains strong and influential (see Bandyopadhyay, 2019). The social, political and economic environment in sub-Saharan Africa remain strongly tied to the Western religious project in socio-cultural life, for example, how the African political elite support and (ab)use Christianity and its structures to their advantage (See Matemba, 2011). The absence of “... a radical theological reflection ... [that rejects] ... white Christianity, white God, and white Jesus...” [remains a serious concern] (Banda, 2019, nd). Misconceptualisation of African traditional practices in the expression of Christianity in Africa as “African Christianity” instead of seeing this as merely a ‘perfect’ case of inculturation, is an obstacle to decolonisation, for after all, how can something that is already ‘African’ be part of a decolonial project? (see Kalilombe, 1999; Mbewe, 2018). Finally, lack of a “... a vibrant and inclusive social context (safe space) that allows a diversity of ideas [e.g.], worldviews and critical reflection” (Coetzee, 2021, 4) on what humanises rather than dehumanises for the benefit of society (Mugambi, 1994).

‘African’ Christianity: A misconceptualisation

The term ‘African Christianity’ is an attempt to conceptualise African expressions and interpretations of Christianity and its theology, as being ‘African’ Christianity (Amanze, 1998a) - the idea that “... Christianity is indeed an African religion” (Fielder, 1999, 15) or that Christian theology is “... already cooked in an African pot” (Amanze, 1998b, 61). This, in my view is gross misrepresentation. Hilary Mijoga (2000) has demonstrated even when African Instituted Churches (AICs) express their religiosity in their own terms (i.e. embedding elements of African culture through inculturation), such churches remain essentially and fully Christian because there is no evidence to suggest, for example, that they are “... vanguards of African culture...” (Mijoga, 2000, 167). Despite some thoughts to the contrary (see Mugambi, 1994; Fiedler, 1999), I argue that Christianity in Africa (in whatever guise) remains a foreign religion because it did not emerge naturally and culturally from African peoples.

Africans, however, have welcomed, embraced and even exploited it to their needs in many different and innovative ways. So, for me no problem here at all. Conrad Mbewe, a Zambian theologian, argue that “strictly speaking, there is no such thing as African Christianity or Asian Christianity or Western Christianity” (Mbewe, 2018, np). After all, a religion comes to the people from its origin as one. For example, there is one Jewish faith, Islamic faith and Bahai faith as portrayed in their Holy Scriptures - although of course there are internal pluralities and therefore variations of theological expressions within one religious faith. As has been suggested, “we should refuse to join those who have the agenda of making ‘African

Christianity’ [and instead] ... we should insist on fighting for the purity of the gospel in any culture” (Mbewe, 2018, np). As I see it, what we have in sub-Saharan Africa is a case of ‘Christians in Africa’ and not ‘African Christians’ or putting it differently, ‘Christianity in Africa’ and not ‘African Christianity’. Why is this distinction important? It is important because if we say that Christianity is already ‘African’ (which it is not), then what is there to decolonise or indeed, decolonise it from what if it is already African in decolonised format (i.e. African)?

Anticolonialism for radical action in decolonising theological education

If theological education in sub-Saharan Africa is to decolonise, I suggest the application of an anticolonial prism to understand this dynamic and what can be done. Anticolonialism is an action-packed framework that has emerged from postcolonial discourse but with the aim for revolutionary change in the postcolonial settlement. It criticises colonial vestiges in the postcolonial settlement as informed by African/Africanist scholars in the scholarship (Sefa-Dei, 2015; Wane 2008; Cossa 2018; Matemba, 2021; Noxolo, 2017) and other critical anti/postcolonial theorists (Shahjahan 2011; Shizha 2013; Nye 2019; Emard and Nelson, 2020). Importantly, the framework challenges not only the colonial but also crucially the postcolonial environment (and the failure of its political and religious elites and other actors in social space) if theological education in sub-Saharan Africa is to decolonise (sufficiently) beyond the current status quo (Matemba, 2015). It offers resistance and radical action against postcolonial conceptions in which the “colonial space has been left intact to continue with its imperializing gaze, scripting and regularization of the “other”” (Simmons and Sefa-Dei 2012, 69).

According to Emard and Nelson (2020) “an anticolonial approach analyzes the material workings of colonial power manifested in ... racialized social hierarchies ... that have endured into the present” (Emard and Nelson, 2020). Importantly, an anticolonial framework therefore relates to African epistemologies and worldviews in moving the discourse beyond the limitations of a postcolonial framework because the prefix ‘anti’ denotes “. . . sites of resistance within colonial relations of power’ [and giving the colonised] “. . . power and discourse to resist these colonial relationships” (Shahjahan 2011, 183). An anticolonial framework thus provides not only the theoretical tools to critique how theological education engages with the (neo)colonial encounter but importantly its potential to liberate and empower those with the mandate (and responsibility) in the academy to forge a decolonial path for the discipline (see Matemba, 2021). The framework opens up possibilities for theological education truly ‘cooked in an African pot’ (Fiedler, Gundani and Mijoga, 1998).

Decolonial strategies for Theological Education in sub-Saharan Africa

In this final section, I highlight decolonial strategies for theological education in sub-Saharan. The need for African theologians “to re-engage with their own societies [critically and] seek to understand where their problems lie, and develop theoretical as well as practical ways to deal with them” (Clapham, 2020, 51). The need to develop “. . . a completely new hermeneutical key ... relevant to the (new) ‘ancient-future’ worldview in the context of Africa” (Tshaka cited in Knoetze, 2021, 2). Importantly, in the hermeneutical space, Africans should define “the questions to be asked and the answers to be sought in terms that are truly rooted in Africa itself” (Clapham, 2021, 136). The decolonial process should involve a critical engagement of scholarly knowledge, including uncomfortable issues, in the public understanding of theology, for after all, issues of coloniality are painful and requiring radical action. Challenging ingrained coloniality in classroom discourse to ensure that classroom interactions and debates are geared to support decolonial processes in theological education (see Lau, 2020).

Both students and teachers of theology should "... strive to comprehend and familiarise themselves with all the logical types of knowledge ... [but]... far from permitting Western triumphalism or the retrieval of pre-colonial African tradition" (see Enslin and Horsthemke cited in Mathebula, 2019, 12). Theology as 'practised' should dig really deep into issues that speak directly against the corrosive and pervasive nature of coloniality in knowledge-production and dissemination, enabling also space for uncomfortable discussions of thorny issues. This should involve materials and discussions that challenge sexism, gender violence, tribalism, patriarchy, homophobia and other forms of marginalisation and exclusion. Decolonising theological education should involve a radical shift in the curriculum involving the use of multiple sources to 'hear' different voices ('knowledge democracy'), a process that inform knowledge we teach and methodologies we use to teach that material (Mathebula, 2019). There should be deliberate attempts to recentre African ways of understanding and 'doing' theology but not at the expense of other equally valid knowledge claims.

In my own denomination, the Seventh-day Adventist church, there is need to tap into local knowledge left to us by past great African pastors, administrators and teachers (including women) to ensure that theological thinking in the church is based not only on 'missionary triumphs in Africa' but on all (both African leaders and Western missionaries) who have equally dedicated their service to the church. Ideally, coloniality should also critically call to question the veracity of the perspectives being centred to ensure that they are free from embedded marginalisation of their own against other voices that require serious attention in theological education (e.g. Homophobia, sexism, patriarchy and tribalism). After all, decolonisation is about a "collective struggle that seeks to liberate rather than domesticate those less fortunate than others" (Mathebula, 2019, 20). The point is that decolonised theological education should engage in a "... critical study of all perspectives as legitimate equal objects of knowledge without undue privileging and prejudicing some perspectives" (Manthalu and Waghid, 2019, x). That is allowing for hybridity of ideas "... where a people respectfully and volitionally appropriate elements of other people" (Manthalu and Waghid, 2019, 30).

Conclusion

From the discussion in this presentation, it is evident that decolonising theological education in sub-Saharan Africa will require 'revolutionary' change in the theological academy, through new and critical ways of 'theorising' and 'doing' theology in Africa. I argue that an anticolonial approach provides sharper tools to force change in breaking the pervasive 'chains' of vestiges of coloniality (in its various guises), towards reframing a decolonised theological education curriculum in ways that opens it to different 'truth claims' in a common theological space. The framework should serve as a rallying call for Africans and Africanists to take radical action in challenging the status quo in doing theology in sub-Saharan Africa. I hope that from this conference we are informed, energised, challenged and equipped to take the bull by its horns and do something drastic about the settled condition of theological education in sub-Saharan Africa. The large gathering at this conference gives hope of possibilities in decolonising theological education in sub-Saharan Africa.

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