

CONCEPTUALISING AFRICAN THEOLOGIES AND 'THE SCHOLARS' STANDPOINTS: A COMPARATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

Africans have been deeply rooted in religion and theology since the beginning of time. In an effort to express the theological viewpoints and experiences of African peoples, a number of scholars have contributed to the development of African theologies as a separate field over time. Numerous academics have influenced the topic, each contributing their own viewpoint and perspective. This paper, therefore, seeks to present a comparative analysis of the diverse conceptualisations of African theologies, emphasising their subtleties and complexity while exploring the varied perspectives of leading scholars or academics in the area. In order to give a thorough and comparative analysis of the idea of African theologies, the paper adopts a biblical comparative design paradigm and explanatory model. The results demonstrate a more profound comprehension of African theologies vis-à-vis African Christian theology and African traditional theology.

Keywords: african theologies, scholars' standpoints, comparative review, african christian theology, african traditional theology.

Introduction

Theology has become a conundrum giving the positions hold by some of our theologians on the meaning of the concept in Africa. Scholars (African theologians) have delved into constructing an *African theology* that will make Christianity and Christian theology intelligible to Africans. This attempt has greatly sharpened and facilitated theological discourse in Africa. However, this attempt has become an arduous task to accomplish by African theologians due to differing standpoints they hold. This has, indeed, resulted in kaleidoscopic conceptualisations of *African theology or African theologies*.¹

Samuel Waje Kunhiyop (2012) asserts that theology deals with how we understand God and His revelation to His creation. He emphasises that theology is also concerned with matters of faith and eternal happiness as our ultimate goal, which includes a “self-conscious scholarly enterprise of understanding.” Theology is of two divides: the spiritual and the academic spheres. Over the centuries, Christians have tended to emphasise either the scholarly or the spiritual side of the divide. However, the universities have taken the academic route while the seminaries or theological colleges have been more concerned with the spiritual side, focusing on faith, prayer, virtue and passion for God.² Some Christians who are not academically inclined have tended to shy away from the scholarly side but hold on to the spiritual sphere of theology; while some academically sound Christians prefer the scholarly aspect of theology and therefore non-spiritual. In the view of this author, either side of the divide has denied themselves something of great values. “There have been misrepresentations, mistrust, suspicion and even name-calling on both sides of the divide.”³ Indeed, the true meaning of theology lies somewhere between the two extremes. It is both an intellectual and spiritual search for answers to questions about divine revelations and the human conditions.⁴ Theology is useless if it confines itself merely to ideas or abstracts. It has to be practically concerned with everyday life and the issues that affect God’s creatures. “Indeed, it is as much interested in real life as it is interested in correct belief, for doctrine and practice are intimately related.”⁵ Kunhiyop maintains that the primary source of Christian theology is God’s unveiling of Himself and His will to His creation. Definitely, theology would be purely speculative without God’s revelation because theology is built on divine revelation – this is the sure foundation of theology. It is the starting point when engaging or doing theology. God’s revelation is given in two forms. There is His general revelation of Himself through history, nature and the human conscience; and there is His special revelation of Himself in the Holy Scriptures He gives to humanity. “Both forms of revelation are important in theology, but the Scriptures have the dominant, authoritative, judging and evaluative role.”⁶ In essence, all other factors that are brought into Christian and theological reflections spiritually and scholarly must yield to the finality of the revelation of God as established in His word – the Holy Bible. This is because “all Scripture” has its source in God (2Tim 3:16). Kunhiyop avers that Christian ethics and morality are the end result of theology. Hence, we cannot say that the theoretical issues of theology are only important for

¹ “African theologies” is used in this paper to mean different theological stands in Africa since African has different theological views. It is also to cater for different strands of theologies in Africa since Africa has no unified theology. However, “African theology” and “African theologies” are used interchangeably here.

² Samuel Waje Kunhiyop. *Frican christian theology*. Hippobooks: 2012.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

scholars, teachers, students or professors in the classroom. Nevertheless, theology affects the way we behave in real-life situations.

No doubt, Africans are religious and theologically sound from time immemorial. Thus, in an effort to express the theological viewpoints and experiences of African peoples, a number of scholars have contributed to the development of African theologies academically as a separate discipline over time. Numerous academics have influenced the topic, each contributing their own viewpoint and perspective. This paper, therefore, seeks to present a comparative analysis of the diverse conceptualisations of African theologies, emphasising their subtleties and complexity while exploring the varied perspectives of leading scholars or academics in the field.

A Critical Review of the Concept of Theology

The original conceptual meaning of the word *theology* is gradually tilting towards polymorphous colouration which may eventually produce kaleidoscopic interpretations of God and the universe. Even though God cannot be comprehensively understood, He can be humanly apprehended by the help of the Holy Spirit. In other words, God cannot be comprehended but He can be apprehended. Kaleidoscopically, according to Samuel Waje Kunhiyop (2012),⁷ the word *theology* was originally used by ancient Greek poets to refer to myths about pagan gods, but in the second century, Clement of Alexandria adopted the term to mean “the true knowledge of God”. In the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo in North Africa used the word *theology* to refer to the study of temporal rather than eternal matters. “He did not see these as separate but as complementary. Both were meant to serve wisdom, the acquisition of which was the ultimate goal of all philosophy.” It was only in the twelfth century that the term *theology* gained a more technical meaning. Kunhiyop says that Peter Abelard, a medieval French philosopher, “taught that theology was sacred learning as a whole, as distinguished from secular disciplines such as the sciences.”

To understand the meaning of a word, there is a need to go to the root or original meaning of the word. The word *theology* comes from a combination of two Greek words: *theos* and *logia*. The word *theos* means “God” and *logia* means “discourse” or “study”, or “rational thought”. Therefore, literally, *theology* is nothing but a discourse or study of God or rational thought about God. Theology is not the same thing as religion. “Theology is the attempt to give a rational explanation of our belief; it is thinking about religion”⁸. Even though theology is the study of God or about God, one cannot study God like one studies Economics, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, or Law; because, God is invisible and there are various beliefs about Him. It should be noted that “Beliefs” is the key word here⁹. According to Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olsen (1996)¹⁰, some dictionaries define theology more formally and specifically as the “Science of God”. He explains further that *science* in this sense simply means “reflection on something”. The authors, Grenz and Olsen, view

⁷ Samuel Waje Kunhiyop. *Frican christian theology*. Hippobooks: 2012

⁸ Babatunde Adedibu and Oluseun Ajayi. “The role of theological training in sustainable ministerial performance amongst nigerian pentecostal churches” in *Spectrum: Journal of contemporary Christianity and society*: 2016.

⁹ Marbaniang, Domenic. *Notes and essays on theology*. 2015.

¹⁰ Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olsen. *Who needs theology? An Invitation to the study of God*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press: 1996

theology as “any thinking, reflecting or contemplating on the reality of God – even on the question of God”¹¹. They also say theology is “the attempt to reach below the surface of life and gain a deeper understanding of God.”¹² In a response to some frequently misgivings about the concept of theology, Grenz and Olsen (1996)¹³ assert that “Everyone is a theologian”. They say that theology seeks to understand God’s being, God’s nature and God’s relationship to the world. “It answers the questions such as: Who is God like? How does God treat us? What does God do? And it poses queries like: Is everything God? Or is God distinct from the universe and its processes”¹⁴.

In another dimension, the word *theology* comes from the Latin word *theologia* (θεολογία), and this word from the Greek, which means: “God-speaks” or “speaking about God.” The study of theology has God as its subject matter and speaks about God.¹⁵ “Theology is the way of God to man; not the way of man to God.”¹⁶ This is summarised in the language of classical philosophy: *principium theologia- principium* is speaking of the origin or source, the beginning, the foundation, or the norm. Thus, God is the source of our theology. In other words, our study must be based on the revelation of God from the beginning to the end. “This revelation is the source and the norm of our speaking about God.”¹⁷ If God had not revealed Himself to man, it is practically impossible to study Him. This study is made possible through God’s revelation. Therefore, “All human knowledge, in a matter of speaking, is theology.”¹⁸ Webster’s dictionary defines theology as “The science of God or of religion; the science which treats of the existence, character, and attributes of God, his laws and government, the doctrines we are to believe, and the duties we are to practice. . . the science of Christian faith and life.” Saint Augustine in the fifth-century defined theology as “Rational discussion respecting the deity.” A. H. Strong, the great twentieth century theologian said that theology is “the Science of God and of the relations between God and the universe.” In his view, Charles Ryrie, the popular dispensationalist theologian, says theology is “thinking about God and expressing those thoughts in some way.” Millard Erickson, a modern Baptist theologian sees theology as “the study or science of God.”¹⁹ In his work titled *The Theology of Jesus*, Dele Alaba Ilesanmi (2024)²⁰ defines theology as “the spiritual science or study of God in relation to the universe He has created which includes the visible and the invisible, the natural and the supernatural, the world around us and the world beyond us.” This encompasses the study of the beliefs, the texts, the history and the practices of a religious tradition. He argues that “No one can live a second without God and no one can live a day without doing theology.” Ilesanmi’s theological standpoint is a pointer to the important role theology plays in human life. In another development, Theology is known as “a reasoned discourse about God.”²¹ This term results from

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ National Open University of Nigeria. Types of theology. Course code: CTH 122. (2007).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Amenu Daba. “Introduction to theology”. D A B A Waktola https://www.academia.edu/40447268/Introduction_to_Theology?sm=b

²⁰ Ilesanmi, Dele A. *The theology of Jesus*. A thesis submitted to international school of theology towards the fulfillment of requirements for the degree of doctor of theology in theology: 2024

²¹ Maurice Wiles, *What Is Theology?* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 7.

a combination of two words: λογία (logia) ‘word’ or ‘reason’, and Θεός (Theos) God. This is one of the definitions for understanding God in general academic studies. In the Christian world, there are many other definitions. One of them is the phrase of St. Anselm: “fides quaerens intellectum” – “faith seeking understanding.”²²

Similarly, Grenz and Oslen (1996) define Christian theology by saying that “Christian theology is reflecting on and articulating the God-centred life and beliefs that Christians share as followers of Jesus Christ, and it is done in order that God may be glorified in all Christians say and do”²³ The duo identify two tasks of theology as having “the critical functions of examining the truths of beliefs held in the church, and of evaluating the relative importance of different Christian beliefs. They reiterate that theology also has the constructive task “to set forth the unity and coherence” of biblical teachings. The authors submit that the theologians of the early church were mostly church leaders. It was during the high Middle Ages that the universities began to produce professional theologians who were not church leaders, which has become much more the norm in the modern age²⁴. The production of professional theologians by secular universities has brought dynamism to the usage of the word *theology*. Some of these secular university theologians have deviated from the essence of theology – the study of, the reflection of, or the rational thinking about God – to empty critique of theology – the unprofitable rationality, rational egoism, or rational illusion. Theology goes beyond the acquisition of academic information. In theology, faith is vital; indeed, faith is fulcrum upon which theology, especially Christian theology is built. Academic information is not absolute; the Bible is. Faith is predicated on the word of God and theology is predicated on faith. Thus, theology is the study of God or God’s Word and this study must be grounded in faith and not in gathering of academic data. Even the devil has a lot of theological information, but he is the devil simply because he can’t have faith in the Truth; he is the father of lies²⁵. Therefore, “Theology devoid of faith is diabolical”²⁶. Therefore, faith is the driver of theology.

Furthermore, theology, according to Domenic Marbaniang (2015), is “the science of divine things.” In their view, Adedibu and Ajayi (2016)²⁷ crisply write that theology is a rational thinking about God and it is not identical with religion but the science of God and the thinking about religion. According to them, the object and theme of theological investigation is the Supreme Being (God)²⁸. In their theological conceptualisation discourse, they further stress that theology encompasses the Trinitarian nature and existence of God vis-à-vis man and the universe, including religion.²⁹ They aver that theology, as a branch of knowledge, could also be seen as “the science of religion because God is the central subject of religion.”³⁰ The two theologians regard theology as

²² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 2.

²³ Op.cit. Grenz and Olsen. 1996.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Op.cit. Marbaniang, Domenic. *Notes and essays on theology*. 2015.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Adedibu and Ajayi explains the distinction between theology and religion better in their work titled, *The Role of Theological Training in Sustainable Ministerial Performance amongst Nigerian Pentecostal churches*, in Spectrum: Journal of Contemporary Christianity and Society, Adedibu, Babatunde (eds., et.al), Vol.1 No.1, April 2016, pp.59-81

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

a science. They argue that because “science is a profound and consistent knowledge which would not regard superficial views as ground for valid statement”. Therefore, theology “examines the strength and worth of religious convictions and all that can be learnt about realities which underlie them with necessary observations and conclusions coming from legitimate reasoning.”³¹

Citing D. D. Cecil Russell (1953),³² Raymundo Villaneva Mendiola (2023) writes:³³

In 1953 Casa de Publicaciones El Faro published the small work *Teología* (Theology) by Rev. D. D. Cecil Russell. As explained in its preface, by that time it had been in use as an introductory study to the “noble science of Theology” at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Mexico for 10 years. This book defines theology as “the science of God and his relation to the universe.” It explains that we can gain knowledge of God from two sources, Nature and Scripture. It calls the knowledge of God obtained from nature “natural theology” and that obtained from Scripture, “supernatural” or “revealed theology.” This is the classical definition of Theology that has endured through the centuries.

Mendiola continues, saying:

According to Dr. Sproul, theology studies “the very essence and character of God.” In the same book he states that “The science of theology is an attempt to know God coherently and consistently.” These are simple examples of the classical understanding of theology as the study of or about God.³⁴

Mendiola raises an objection to this view of theology thus:

All science must study that which is part of created reality. God is not a part of created reality, rather he provides the necessary conditions for the existence of creation. God reveals Himself to us, but not in order for us to have scientific knowledge of Him. His revelation is the boundary between Him and us. Even in the midst of His revelation God is incomprehensible, since what He is doing is adapting Himself to our capacities, condescending, in Calvin's words, to babbling in order to make Himself understood to humanity. God is not an object of study because He is not a creature, rather He is the One who comes to meet man and demands his loyalty and total devotion. Hence that covenantal insistence of God to Abraham: “Walk before me and be perfect,” is not an invitation to study God through contemplation, but to live before him in total obedience.³⁵

In the words of Dr. Wolters:

As Christians we confess that the Scriptures have the authority of God, which is supreme over everything else – over public opinion, over education, over child-

³¹ Ibid.

³² D. D. Cecil Russell. *Teología* (Theology). Casa de Publicaciones El Faro, 1953

³³ Raymundo Villanueva Mendiola. “Are we all theologians? Definition and Contours of theology” in *Journal of reformational thought*, with the theme: Theology. (2023). Issue 4.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

rearing, over the media, and in short over all the powerful agencies in our culture by which our worldview is constantly being shaped... there is considerable pressure on Christians to restrict their recognition of the authority of Scripture to the area of the church, theology, and private morality – an area that has become basically irrelevant to the direction of culture and society as a whole.

Mendiola asserts that “We cannot consistently uphold the authority of Scripture in a theological sense if we do not implement it in politics, society, culture, economics, or education. All of Scripture for all of life.”

Conceptualising African Theologies and the Scholars’ Standpoints

African theology seems to be a quandary since scholars are yet to agree on a definitive meaning of the concept and thus consider it as a polymorphous and nebulous subject. It seems that some scholars that have no business with theology are trying to make the concept complex to define. What is more, the positions hold by some scholars demonstrate the complexity of the seemingly enigmatic concept, *African theology*. This is quite not unexpected in academic tradition. It will help us to look at the subject in all possible ways for a robust understanding. For the purpose of clarity, therefore, the plural *African theologies* is used here interchangeably, when necessary, with the singular form, *African theology*, to cater for different strands of theologies in Africa since Africa has no unified theology. This, perhaps, brings another complexity to the subject.

African theology as an intellectual or academic discipline started during the 1950s, when the revolt against African colonialism led to several newly independent states.³⁶ During this period, Africans wanted Christ to intervene in their present subjugation, exploitation, and dehumanising circumstances under the colonial power when they had seen the difference.³⁷ However, many scholars and traditional African believers regard Christianity as a foreign or western religion, different from their African Traditional Religion (ATR). Therefore, consider their Christian theology a foreign theology because it is not rooted in African culture. If Christianity is considered a foreign religion, an African religion is a local religion. Similarly, as we consider Western theology a foreign theology, thus, an African theology can be regarded as a local theology. This implies that African theology is local. According to Benson Ohihon Igboin (2018), “Local theology is the locus, that is, the community culture that receives Christianity.”³⁸ Local theology is the autochthonous cultural belief system³⁹ that received Christian theology. Thus, Christian theology is alien to local or African theology. Igboin stresses that local theologies pay a large attention to semiotics of culture since voice is generated within a cultural prism. He concludes that “there is

³⁶ Ottuh, John Arierhi. “Biblical Research in Africa: Historical Jesus Quest in Inculturation Perspective” Stinton: 2004:7

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Igboin, O Benson. “Local theologies, African Pentecostalism, and African culture” in Adedibu, B. A and Igboin, B.O (eds) Changing faces of African Pentecostalism. Adekunle Ajasin University Press: 2018

³⁹ Ibid.

no philosophy, theology or culture that is not local; they all grew and drew from a local context. They are a product of an autochthonous understanding of cosmology...”

In his view, Edward W. Fashole-Luke (1975) acknowledged that many African theologians are not well prepared. He pointed out that "Unfortunately, there are few African theologians with the necessary source materials, of sufficient high quality, so that African Christian theologies will rise above the level of banal and peripheral"⁴⁰. He expresses doubt because of this lack of preparation of our African theologians in Biblical studies that “consultations, conferences and seminars on African theology simply affirm the uniqueness of Christianity and the primary status of Scripture and then quickly pass on to African traditional religions and the impact of westernized Christianity upon them.”⁴¹ To save African theology, according to Fashole-Luke, from being “sterile, bankrupt, and unworthy of the African tradition nourished by Tertullian, Cyprian, Tyconius, and Augustine,” there is need to research the meaning of the biblical text and applied it in the African setting in light of its original meaning.⁴²

In their article titled *African theology and African Christology: Difficulty and complexity in contemporary definitions and methodological frameworks*, Christopher Magezi and Jacob T. Igba (2018) state that African theology has challenge of definition because of two important reasons: (1) the quest for a definitive African theology is a fairly recent pursuit and (2) the vastness and diversity of the African continent⁴³. They argue further that:

Regardless of many definitions of African theology and its purposes ... African Christian theology as theology that should be derived from the interplay between Scripture, Christian tradition and African cosmology. In deriving theology from the aforementioned aspects, African theology should also seek to develop contextual African theologies with global relevance⁴⁴.

The quest for a definitive African theology is a fairly recent pursuit, as well as the vastness and diversity of the African continent⁴⁵. Many theologians have their own views of an African theology. For instance, John Mbiti boldly asserts, “I will use the term 'African Theology' in this paper, without apology or embarrassment, to mean theological reflection and expression by African Christians.”⁴⁶ In his views, J.W. Z. Kurewa explains African theology as “the study that seeks to reflect upon and express the Christian faith in African thought-forms and idiom as it is experienced in African Christian communities, and always in dialogue with the rest of Christendom”.⁴⁷ However African theology has been explained, what should stand out for those who desire to be true evangelical African theologians is that African theology is a Bible-centred and relevant theology that arises from the philosophy of the African people to speak to their spiritual needs.

⁴⁰ This was cited by Samuel Ngewa in his work titled, “The Validity of Meaning and African Christian Theology” in *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*. He cited Edward W. Fashole-Luke in his work, “The Quest for African Christian theologies,” JRT 32.2 (1975): 80. The same article was published in the *Ecumenical Review* 27 (1975): 259-269 and SJT 29 (1976) 159-75.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Christopher Magezi and Jacob T. Igba, *African theology and African Christology: Difficulty and complexity in contemporary definitions and methodological frameworks*, the statement was made in the abstract jointly written by these writers, 2018

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mbiti, John “The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology” in Kofi Appiah-Kubi Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology En Route*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), p. 83.

⁴⁷ Kurewa, J.W.Z “The Meaning of African Theology” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 11 (1975), p. 36.

The questions of where does the term ‘African theology’ originate and how did it come to be a foundational expression in theological circles all over Africa⁴⁸ are not relevant here.

We can simply say: African theology is the theology of Africans or the reflection or thinking, study, and understanding of the African people about God and the universe He has created. To avoid the complexity the term, “African Theology” may bring, it is important, therefore, to state here that African Theology can be seen in two ways: (1) African Traditional Theology (ATT) and (2) Other African Theologies (OAT), be it African Christian theology (ACT), African Muslim (Islamic) Theology, African Liberation theology, African Narrative theology, etc. But this paper is mainly concerned with African Traditional Theology (ATT) and African Christian Theology (ACT). It is necessary to define the major difference between these two terms or concepts for the purpose of clarity.

African Christian Theology’s Conceptual Birth

The Christianisation of Africa began with the arrival of earliest Christian missionaries who sought to impart Christian doctrine with foreign idioms, making use of Western ideograms and imageries.⁴⁹ The introduction of Christian religion in African was initially, fundamentally based on Western culture, not biblical traditions.⁵⁰ According to M. Y. Nabofa (1991),⁵¹ the earliest Christian missionaries’ aim was to transform African converts into *Assimilados*⁵² by acculturation. Their aim was to Christianise Africans, not to Africanise Christianity. Nabofa asserts that:

The Christian liturgy did not appeal to the people at that time because it did not have much meaning and reality for them, and so there was no conversion. When it became obvious to the Christian leaders that the people were not totally converted, they embarked upon an African Christian theology. The aim was to contextualise Christian theology in African culture. The liturgy was considerably modified by this Africanisation, and element of traditional worship such as singing, drumming, clapping of hands, and dancing were introduced into Christian worship.

Since then, Christian theology has been greatly influenced by traditional African religion through the lens of ACT. Such influence is felt in marriage, naming, procreation, Christian liturgy, evangelisation methods, institutional nomenclature, personal nomenclature, honours, harvest thanksgiving, burial, wake-keep, etc. African Traditional Theology is built on African traditional religious concepts. This refers to what God or gods reveals to the traditional Africans; the African perspectives about God and gods. This includes African cosmological interpretations and understanding. On the other hand, African Christian Theology is not built on African traditional religious thoughts and concepts. It is rather a theology built on Christian traditions and

⁴⁸ Kame, Greg. “An Evangelical Approach to Doing Theology in Africa: A Case for a Biblio-Centric African Theology,”

https://www.academia.edu/11717371/An_Evangelical_Approach_to_Doing_Theology_in_Africa_A_Case_for_a_Kurewa,J.W.Z_The_Meaning_of_African_Theology in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 11 (1975), p. 36.

⁴⁸ Kame, Greg. “An Evangelical Approach to Doing Theology in Africa: A Case Biblio_Centric_African_Theology, retrieved 9/12/2022

⁴⁹ Nabofa, M.Y. “Religion and culture” in Thompson, L. A., et. al.(eds). *Culture and Civilization*, (Afrika-Link Communication Limited, 1991) 76-91

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The word *Assimilados* is a Portuguese term to refer to individuals or groups who have adopted the dominant culture, language, or customs of a society other than their own.

presuppositions that is biblically based, Christ-centered, and Holy Spirit-controlled. It is a theology that helps to make Christian teaching intelligible to Africans, employing and contextualising African concepts and contexts as a medium of conveying the truths to the Africans but employing the Bible as a barometer with Christ occupying the centrality of contextualization and inculturation without a vestige of compromise. To view African Theology as African Christian Theology, as posited by Galadima⁵³, and some other theologians is an error of perception and attempt to subjugate Autochthonous African Theology. The concept of “African theology” cannot be assumed to refer to African Christian theology exclusively.⁵⁴

At this juncture, it will be pertinent to define African Theology. Again, it should be noted that the quest for a definitive African theology only became an academic concern arguably in the late 1950s and the 1960s.⁵⁵ As earlier stated, the concept of African theology is polymorphous following the diversity of African continent and theologians who make the concept complex. Christopher and Jacob state that:

However, if theology is generally understood as reflection and discourse about God, African theology then is that theological endeavour which is embarked upon mostly by Africans and non-Africans who are familiar with the African milieu, and who are seeking to respond to such issues theologically⁵⁶

We must understand that the theological explorations into the indigenous cultures of the African peoples gave rise to a different theological strand designated as “African theology”⁵⁷ because the theology derives its context from the traditional or indigenous contents. This is a blatant fact that we cannot avoid. Every theology has its local identities derived from its cultural and traditional contents and contexts. Thus, African theologies are not different. The kind of complexity attached to this shibboleth called “African Theology” by theologians is not necessary.

It should be noted here that Africans had a valid knowledge about God’s existence and creation before the advent of Europeans who brought Christianity to Africa. African had a way of studying God and the universe He has created. They have their own religious presuppositions that guided their actions. God was not new to Africans when the Europeans came to introduce Christianity to them. But the way Christianity was introduced to them was strange to them. Africans are the most religious people in the world. The Traditional African societies believed in God. They worshiped God and other gods. They did see (and still see) other smaller gods as intermediaries between God and man. But they still give God his honour and reference Him the most among other gods. For example, the Yoruba of West Africa in Nigeria see God as *Olodumare*, that is, the Supreme Being, the Owner of all, with not less than 16,000 divinities. These divinities are speculatively arranged under Him (God/Olodumare) hierarchically in the following broad groups:

1. Principal Divinities – these are divinities that came into existence after the creation of the world;
2. Deified Personalities;
3. Those associated with natural phenomena; and
4. Those generated from natural elements.⁵⁸

⁵³ Galadima, Bulus. Evaluation of the Theology of Bolaji Idowu, (African Journal of Evangelical Theology, 20.2, 2001) P.106

⁵⁴ Op.cit., Christopher and Jacob, 2018

⁵⁵ Op.cit., Christopher Magezi and Jacob T. Igba 2018.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Nabofa, M. Y., Religion and Culture, in Culture and Civilization Thompson, Adelugba, and Ife(eds.) (Africa-Link Books, Bodija, Ibadan, 1991) Pp.79-80

Conversely, the traditional egalitarian societies such as Igbo and Urhobo people of Eastern and Southern Nigeria regard the Supreme Being as just one of the spiritual beings, though believed to be the first among equals. They believed that He (God) has no power to impose His will on other spiritual forces.⁵⁹ The Ekiti people of Yoruba nation in Southwestern Nigeria have perfect description of God. They call God *Obaluaye*, meaning: “the King of the world” or *Abarisa*, the Father of all gods (deities/divinities). Hence, the saying in Ekiti dialect:

*Abarisa ni megungun k’ado,
Ko mu Sango ki’badan,
Komegberundinlogun urumole kegbe oba*

Interpreted thus:

The Father of all gods (God of gods) gave masquerades to Ado (Ado-Ekiti),
He gave god of thunder to Ibadan
He gave 16,000 divinities (gods/godesses) to Egbe Oba (Ikole-Ekiti axis)

Similarly, the typical traditional Ekiti person sees God as the Father of all things, including all gods, both visible and invisible. This is noticed in one of their poetic expressions of prayer:

*Abaorisa baa la ka aye Aba ogiri ojo koku,
Baorisa baa la ka aye Aba i ketera,
Oni ki mo pe ‘rire momo ji segede oro mi se,
Oni ki mo pe ‘rire momo joro mi do mi ooo.*

Interpreted thus:

God of gods, the Father of the universe, the Father of the rumbling thunder,
God of gods, Father of the universe, the Father of all,
Today that I call you, don’t let my dirty ploy (sins) be exposed,
Today that I call you, don’t let my words (prayers) turn to water (be in vain) ooo.

Given the above examples, it is crystal clear that Africans had a valid knowledge of God’s creation and existence from general revelation before the advent of the Europeans. Thus, they have their theology and that theology is what this researcher calls African Traditional Theology (ATT). It is different from African Christian Theology (ACT). If theology is the study of God, Africans were not unaware of the existence of God before the introduction of Christianity in their lands. The Bible supports this in (Acts 17:23-29; Romans 1: 21, 23, and 25). The problem here, (though not common to Africans alone, Israelites and Athenians inclusive), is what this researcher calls *conflictive anthropomorphism or misplaced personifism* (that is, giving or transferring the attributes of God or divine beings to humans, animals and inanimate objects or thing(s) that is/are not the real God in a way that suggests the real God or divine beings) (Exo. 32:1-8; Acts 12:21-23; 17: 23, 29; Romans 1:21, 23). African people believed in Supreme Being and knew that He exists (Rom.1:21) but worshipping Him through other platforms such as nature (water, stone, animal, moon, sun, etc.) made by Him (God) and other images made by man like molten calf, and deified men. ‘... they knew God, they glorified him not as God ...’ (Exo. 32:1-4; Rom. 1: 21) but they worshipped images and animals and man-made images, transferring the glory of God to these false gods/idols (Rom.1:23, 25; cf. Exo. Acts 17: 29; Exo.32:1-8). This is what this researcher calls *conflictive*

⁵⁹ Ibid.

anthropomorphism or misplaced personifism. This, God detests (Isa 42:8, 11). This is caused by what he also calls *ignoraminivistic theism*. *Ignoramivistic theism* means an awareness of or believe in a living God but one fails to give Him an identity of reference due to Him because of His invisibility. The opposite of this concept is *Theistic ignoraminivism* means unawareness of or unknowledgeable about or not believing in a living God due to His invisibility. But *ignoraminivism* is unawareness of invisible things or unknowledgeable about things that cannot be seen but exist; when you believe only things that you can see even though other invisible things exist.

What is more, though many see the move towards articulating Christian theology within an African cultural context as a good step towards contextualisation for the Africans, some try to draw our attention to the danger involved in the steps towards developing an African theology. In his view, Kame states:

It seems to me that in a bid to argue for an African theology in Africa, many theologians Africanize Christian theology rather than contextualize it in the African context. By attempting to Africanize Christian theology, these theologians see the African culture/experience and not the Bible as the starting point for African theology and this seriously questions the Biblio-centricity of African theology⁶⁰.

This author strongly disagrees to Kame's position. We can Africanise Christian theology and we can also Christianise African theology. The former will facilitate intelligibility of Christianity and help to evangelise Africans. The gospel message of Christ will spread rapidly. But the latter will make conversion of souls of Africans very difficult. Even though it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convert, the Bible says wisdom is profitable to direct (Eccl 10:10). Therefore, to Africanise Christian theology is to make this strand of theology, Christian theology, comprehensible to Africans. To do this, we need to contextualise Christian theology in the African context, employing the Bible as a barometer for contextualization. This means, first, we will look at the African substance (content, culture, material, or element) in question, how biblically related is it, to ensure that this does not damage the biblical context and the message of Christ we intend to spread, meaning, or truth we intend to convey before a Christian theologian or educator can use such an African substance/content for contextualisation. In addition, it must be Christ-centered and Holy Spirit-directed. This must be done with caution hence the application of pneumagogy⁶¹ is sine qua non to contextualisation in theology of Christian education to avoid the fear of the danger of syncretism many a theologian talks about in advocating for an African theology, or rather African Christian theology. Furthermore, there is no need to bring out a difference between Africanisation of Christian theology and contextualisation of Christian theology. To Africanise Christian theology is to contextualise it and to Christianise African theology is to inculturate it to make it intelligible to Africans. It is the use of local or African contents that make Christian theology African and, this must be biblically based and Christ-centered, otherwise it is a Westernised or Europeanised Christian theology. The word "Christian" is not a native name of anyone, nation, or race; it is a Christ's insignia attached to His followers to distinguish them from the earthen – Christo unbelievers.

African Christian Theology (ACT) can be seen as a brand of theology that derives its contents from both the Bible and African Traditional Theology to bring Christian traditions or teachings to

⁶⁰ Greg Kame, *An Evangelical Approach to Doing Theology in Africa: A Case for a Biblio-Centric African Theology*, https://www.academia.edu/11717371/An_Evangelical_Approach_to_Doing_Theology_in_Africa_A_Case_for_a_Biblio_Centric_African_Theology, retrieved 9/12/2022

⁶¹ "Pneumagogy" is a term coined by Dele Ilesanmi, which means a biblical method of teaching under the control or leadership of the Holy Spirit.

African understanding. In addition, African Christian theology is “a theology derived from the interplay of Christian tradition, or any aspect of it, on the one hand, and African cosmology or any aspect of it on the other”⁶². Citing Nyende, Christopher and Jacob write:

Nyende contends that the Bible is central to a theology that seeks to be Christian and ‘it is incumbent on those who wish to articulate an African theology to use the Bible in dialogue with African cosmologies and culture for it to be a *Christian* theology’⁶³

They argue further that “African Christian theology refers to a theology that holds to essential orthodoxy in relation to the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith”⁶⁴ It is a theology that tries to make Christian teaching intelligible to Africans employing African concepts as medium of conveying the biblical truths to the Africans. Moreover, this author prefers to use African Christian Theology because Africans have their theology and the word “Christian” makes it different from the African brand of theology both in methodology and practice. It is important we use this term because Christianity is alien to the African people. More so, the doing of African Christian Theology is the desire to promote Christianity in Africa. Another reason that instigates the doing of African Christian theology in Africa is the need to protect Christianity in Africa from syncretism which was commonly found among the Africans during the early arrival of Christianity in Africa. Even though syncretism has not been completely eradicated in Africa, the doing of African Christian theology has helped greatly to curb African syncretism. For example, there is a saying at Osi-Ekiti, Western Nigeria that: *Ari meji ugbagbo li ku pe lalede Osi*, meaning that, “one who does not know how to practice two religions (bitheism or polytheism) dies suddenly in Osi land.” This kind of syncretism is also found in other parts of African communities. No doubt, the doing of ACT in Africa has reduced the tension between Christianity and ATT. Hence, there is a need for contextualisation.

It should be noted again that African Traditional Theology (ATT) and African Christian Theology (ACT) are not necessarily exclusive. In each case, it is believed that God chooses to reveal Himself whether through the Son, Jesus Christ, or through a bush, mountain, water, or other phenomena without a name or description. Here is the interrelatedness: when the interpretation of African traditional theological experience is given a Christian formulation or coloration, then, African Traditional Theology becomes Christian theology. The latter is interpreted in the light of Christ’s teachings, while the former is interpreted in the light of what God has revealed to the African religious consciousness.⁶⁵

R. W. L. Moberly (2009)⁶⁶ tries to distinguish Theology from Religion. He explains that religion is often used to denote a generic kind of thought, piety, and practices, quite discrete from those of politics, economics, and the natural sciences but Theology is then sometimes conceived as an attempt to talk about religious experiences, which risks being a kind of psychobabble with religious jargon. Every religion has scriptures or traditions as their primary source of theology. That of Christian theology and ACT are no exceptions. The primary source of Christian theology and ACT is the Bible. Although there are various theologies within the Christian circle due to various interpretations of the Bible, any theology that does not find expression in Scripture (the Bible) is not Christian theology. Today, there are varied theologies, such as Roman Catholic Theology,

⁶² Op.cit., Christopher and Jacob, 2018

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Op.cit., Galadima, 2001 Pp.110

⁶⁶ Moberly, R. W. L.. *The theology of the book of genesis*. CambridgeUniversity Press: (2009)

Lutheran Theology, Reformed Theology, Renewal Theology, Liberal Theology, Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology, and several others. Any theology that is not biblically grounded is not a Christian theology. There are sources of African Theology. The sources of African Traditional Theology (ATT) are: (1) African Traditional Religion, (2) African Cosmology: the natural phenomena of both visible and invisible cosmos, (3) African Culture, and other African realities. We can also identify four sources of African Christian theology (ACT): (1) African Traditional Religion, (2) African culture, (3) African Cosmology, and (5) the Bible and Christian traditions/teachings.

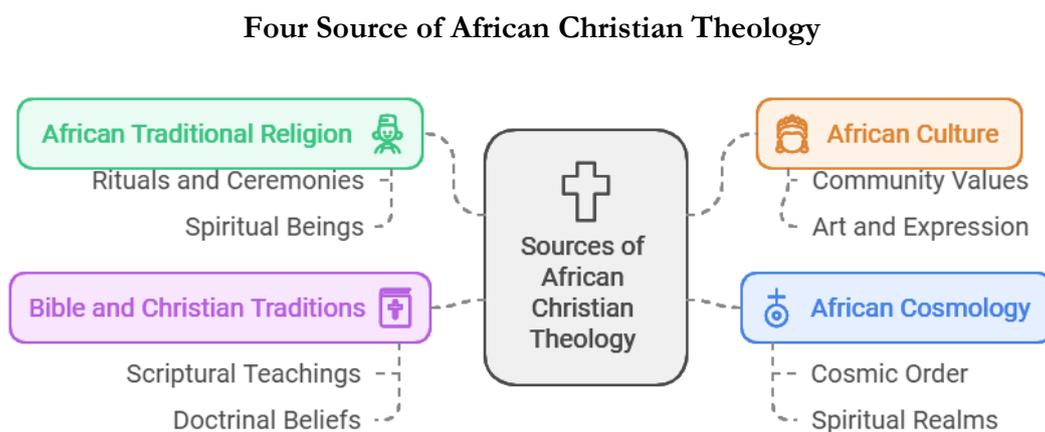
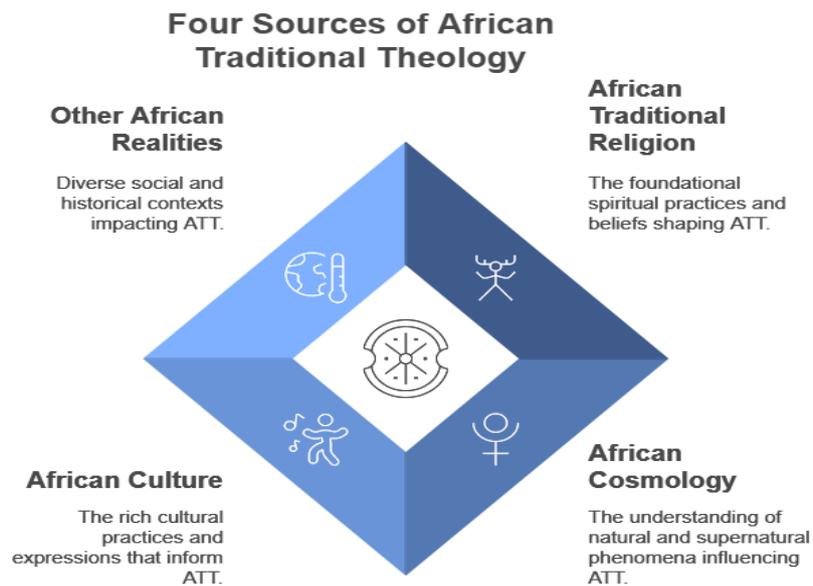


Figure 1: Four Sources of African Traditional Theology.

Greg Kame concludes that:

Christian theology in general is composed of views articulated by individuals in a variety of cultures and existential situations and so it has a variety of points of view. On the one hand, given the diversity of African culture, a Biblically acceptable African theology will also have a variety of points of view based on the theologians' cultural situations⁶⁷.

Kame also advocates an African Biblical Christian theology derivable from African context which this researcher espouses. He says 'I have agreed with many African scholars that it is time for Africans to articulate their Biblical/Christian theology from the perspective of the African cultural context'⁶⁸. This is indeed imperative and perfect timing.

Conclusion

By analysing the perspectives of leading academics in the field, this work has offered a comparative overview of how African theologies are conceptualised. Their viewpoints were found to have both similarities and differences, underscoring the subtleties and complexity of African theologies. The study emphasises how important it is to continue critically examining and thinking about the nature and importance of African theologies. The review study reveals a deeper understanding of African theologies: African Christian theology and African traditional theology.

⁶⁷ Greg Kame, *op.cit*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

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