Shaping a Global Theological Mind

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Chapter 14
Method and Context:
How and Where Theology Works in Africa
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My first encounter with theology as an academic discipline dates back almost a decade and a half. That encounter triggered a series of questions, summed up in the one question: Why study theology? The practical use of this discipline did not appear obvious beyond the immediate concern of proximate preparation for ordained ministry. Since then, these questions have not ceased to stimulate my theological imagination. Presently, with the benefit of teaching theology to an inquisitive, intelligent, and oftentimes unconvinced audience of seminarians, religious, and lay people, the questions have shifted to one of method and, more critically, of context: How to do theology in Africa? In a unique way, these ‘how?’ and ‘where?’ questions define, challenge, and orient theological activity in contemporary Africa. While the former relates to method, the latter focuses on context; and both fix the boundaries of a wider theological synthesis that shapes today’s African theological mind.

Older generations of African theologians inherited a theological method that was recognisably Western, inherently scholastic, and characteristically steeped in metaphysical categories of thought. Their theological activity unfolded within a tightly regulated denominational and ecclesiastical framework. This was true of theologians in mainline churches and their Protestant and Evangelical partners. That period was before the advent of Pentecostalism in Africa. Understandably, the principal preoccupation of these older generations of theologians revolved around how to fit African religious beliefs into constructed Western theological syntheses and categories. Understood in this way, their task was relatively simple: design appropriate, local receptacles for the universal truths of Western Christianity. They might, for example, inquire into the compatibility of the Catholic Christian notion of ‘Communion of Saints’ and the African experience of ‘Ancestor Veneration’. This was quite apart from the more widespread concern with the adaptation and indigenisation of liturgical rubrics and forms of worship. This approach continues to dominate a certain strand of theological activity in Africa christened ‘Inculturation Theology’. There are many examples of how this approach has been taken to the extreme and then used as a substitute for critical theological investigation of received notions of faith, beliefs, and practices.

Contemporary African theologians, whether or not they are affiliated to ecclesiastical institutions, are more aware of and receptive to the critical need for a theological method that pays attention to present-day issues of concern to Africans.
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For them a new methodology matters, as does a serious attention to context. I situate my theological activity within this framework.

As soon as a theologian in Africa begins to pay attention to method and context, he or she is confronted by the unsettling complexities of the African experience. To many outsiders, onlookers, and bystanders, Africa resembles an ‘ocean of misfortunes’. But this epithet hardly defines the primary challenge of context. Africa means many things. With fifty-three independent countries and 700 million people spread across an intricate linguistic, cultural, social, and geo-political landscape, the continent defies any facile attempt to sketch a homogeneous picture of its fortunes or misfortunes. Africa represents a complex and complicated reality fully in evolution. What is true for Africa as a geographical entity holds true for African theology as an academic discipline. Thus theological activity in Africa can be construed as embodying a preliminary methodological caveat: that any reference to all things African would have to be partial, provisional, and contextualised. This methodological caution makes generalisations impossible and points up the need to define the context of one’s theological activity with clarity and to clarify the issues at stake with precision. Where I stand (context) as a theologian in Africa carries implications for how (method) I go about conducting the activity of inquiring into the nature and meaning of God, human existence, and the way they relate to each other.

What factors determine the ‘how’ and ‘where’, the method and context, of theological activity in Africa and ultimately shapes the theological mind? Judging from recent experience the following factors and considerations appear to be pertinent.

Contemporary theological, sociological, and demographic surveys and statistics wax contentedly about the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Africa in the 20th and 21st centuries – so spectacular it tips global Christianity’s centre of gravity southward. Several authors variously designate this phenomenal southward shift of global Christianity as the rise of the ‘Third Church’, ‘Third World Church’ or ‘Two-Thirds Church’. With an optimism that borders on hubris, many declare the future of Christianity to be eternally willed to Africa. Yet, in Africa, analysis falls short if it overlooks the fact that the exponential growth of membership in organised religion is not a grace bestowed exclusively on Christianity; it also characterises the fortunes of Islam and traditional religion, neither of which is necessarily losing adherents to Christianity. Africans are giving more public expressions to their religious affiliations based on a triple heritage (Christianity, Islam, and Traditional Religion) that defines their contemporary worldview. A lengthy excursus on this phenomenon would be irrelevant here. This reality presents a set of challenges for theological activity in Africa, relating to the tension between Africa’s dominant religions (Islam and Christianity) and the often violent struggle to control not only the religious, but also the economic and political space of Africans. How to understand the theological value of this battle for the soul of the African constitutes a pressing methodological concern for the African theological mind.

African Traditional Religion presents another set of methodological and contextual challenges, which the following personal example might help to clarify.

African Traditional Religion continues to play a significant role in shaping my theological mind. As a convert to Catholicism from African Traditional Religion, I face a constant challenge to account for the enduring influence of the latter on the
former. This represents an even wider challenge, precisely because traditional beliefs continue to play an important role in the lives of many other African converts to Christianity. Whether one describes it in derogatory terms (‘faith schizophrenia’), as some theologians are wont to do, or attempts to draw correlations and convergences between both, as others prefer, the fact remains that this tension cannot be wished away. One may take the African out of his or her religion, but this religion reappears in surprisingly potent forms irrespective of the depth of one’s conversion and the tenets of one’s newfound religious affiliation. Confronting this reality in order to integrate it into the Christian understanding of God, faith, and revelation shapes theological activity and defines a methodological concern of contemporary African theologians like myself.

There is yet another factor. Coming from Nigeria, a country of roughly 140 million people, almost equally split between Christians and Muslims, I am constantly intrigued by the various ‘brands’ of Christianity and their increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for marketing the ‘goods’ of Christianity to the populace. Implicit in this practice is the claim that religion offers concrete solutions to the needs of people. The kind of ‘services’ offered by some propagators of Christianity in Africa covers a wide gamut: health, wealth, business success, political power, rapid upward social mobility, etc. Here the intriguing methodological and contextual consideration concerns the timing of this ‘religious boom’ in Africa. Simply stated, the fortunes of religion seem to soar in inverse proportion to the disintegration of the socio-economic and political fabric of African societies. The signs and faces of this collapse appear in varying forms: poverty, hunger, deadly diseases, wars, civil strife, corruption, illegal immigration, etc. I myself have considered three such issues as paramount: HIV/AIDS, refugees, and poverty.1 The reason informing my choice of these issues is not far-fetched. Beside the fact that Africa statistically leads on all three fronts, these are issues that theology and religion could not possibly avoid without completely bypassing ‘where’ faith matters for many Africans today. They challenge African theology with questions of methodological and contextual import: how does one theologise in this kind of situation? If tradition bears any relevance here, how does theology as faith seeking understanding make sense of this kind of situation? How does theology work for a theologian facing the disturbing complexities of the African situation? This is what I consider as one of the fundamental challenges facing theologians in Africa today.

In light of the foregoing, in keeping with my constant concern for method, I shall now describe one specific way in which theology works for me in Africa. It concerns the contribution of the social sciences to theological activity.

Because I am compelled as an African theologian to pay attention to social context and social issues, my approach opens up to the social sciences both as dialogue partners and indispensable resources for theological research. I do not pretend to overlook the possibilities of conflict between theological activity and the approaches of the social sciences. Nevertheless, I have found the combination largely beneficial. Again, the nature of the context influences my receptivity to the input of the social

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sciences. If theological activity focuses on understanding and interpreting ongoing human experience in the light of faith, the social sciences provide useful analytical and descriptive tools of research for this activity. Regrettably, only rarely have published materials appeared in Africa where the most critical tools of the social sciences have been brought to bear on theological scholarship. I myself have used this method extensively in my theological activities.

Since 2000 I have conducted ethnographic field research in various parts of Eastern Africa, notably Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Although some methodologically conservative African theologians would dispute the validity of this approach, these research trips have proved beyond doubt the pertinence of a correct understanding of contextual reality for an appropriate theological method and reflection. To take but one example, it is one thing to account for the meaning and theology of the Incarnation by appealing abstractly to the scholastic categories of person and nature. It is quite another when one encounters, as I did in refugee camps in Tanzania, a re-appropriation of the Incarnation as the concrete, personal experience of God who journeys with the people of God in exile as the ultimate ground of their hope of return and reintegration into their home country. My conviction is that field research equips theology to appreciate correctly and appropriate intensely the density of human experience in a way that a purely speculative and metaphysical approach can neither penetrate adequately nor understand fully.

I hesitate to put a label on this approach. For the sake of convenience I call it a generative contextualised method of conducting theological activity. Contextualised because, as a rational discipline and activity, theology does not defy the laws of gravity to float above the human predicament; and generative, because the outcome of this insertion in human experience is neither predetermined nor amenable to dogmatic and doctrinal manipulation. It can spring forth surprises. The constitutive levels or stages of this approach are multiple, each with a defining question.

First is the moment of encounter of reality in its conditioned and conditioning potential ('What is going on here?'); second is the interpretative moment which draws upon a variety of sources and resources ('What are the different ways of understanding this present reality?'); third is the synthesising moment ('How do we image and re-imagine theology in the face of the complex reality?'); and finally, the generative moment ('What practical models of faith, belief and action suggest themselves in this present context?'). At every stage in this multi-layered approach I have discovered the benefit not only of using and adapting contemporary resources (like the social science method), but also the rich and venerable resources of Scripture, Christian tradition of theology and Catholic social doctrine.

I consider this to be an experimental methodology in need of further refinement and precision. But my conviction remains unshakable: theology is not an exercise in intellectual or speculative weightlessness. Nowhere would this assertion be truer than in Africa. As a theologian I cannot float blissfully above the conditions and complexities of life on a continent that is chronically religious and yet so tragically impoverished. The engagement in theological activity, whether in a professional or lay capacity, demands a radical descent into context, of the theologian and his or
her community, in order to engage vital issues and questions at the interstices of faith and life.

The methodological trajectory sketched above relates eminently to the task of identifying and understanding the function, meaning, and theology of the community called church. In Africa, as in the rest of the ‘Third Church’, it is pertinent to inquire into the link between ecclesial reality and social context. For one thing eclesia is a global phenomenon. Huge leaps in information technology and the present consciousness of globalisation make it impossible to treat the church as an isolated phenomenon. A generative contextualised approach is needed to explore and account for the various ways ecclesiality intersects with global social issues. To take but one example, in Africa, HIV/AIDS poses an unprecedented threat to Church and society. The pews of the Church, the prayer mats of Islam, and the shrines of African deities, gods, and goddesses are populated by people infected or affected by this deadly disease. I find the questions surfaced in this context for theological method extremely interesting: If Africans turn to religion en masse in the time of crisis, how does religion account for and meet their expectation without preying on their misfortunes or offering them a panacea? Here again the questions ‘where?’ and ‘how?’ intersect to create a rich terrain for theological inquiry in Africa.

If faith is construed as a constitutive dimension of the human person long before it is defined and circumscribed by institutional mediation, it remains a reality that is lived in a historical context. Paying attention to this context forms an important ingredient in the shaping of the African theological mind. If theological activity propels the theologian and the outcome of his or her analysis above and beyond concrete reality, then theology loses its raison d’être. I agree with those African theologians, like Jean-Marc Ela, for whom religion must have ‘dirty hands’. What dirties the hand of theology and theologians in Africa are those critical issues which not only soil but menace the lives of millions of religious devotees and place their survival in jeopardy.

My theological vocation in a context such as I have outlined above is a risky one. Not that it exposes the life of the theologian to physical danger, but that it puts the authenticity and validity of his or her work to the test. There are those who consider theological scholarship in Africa a luxury, affordable only by those with guaranteed institutional or denominational support. This criticism is a function of how and where theology was done in the past – it was done in a disincarnate manner, within the closed walls of religious and ecclesiastical institutions. What relevance it had to real life situations was neither obvious nor deemed significant. A new brand of African theology is emerging, one that is not averse to the conditions and complexities of life on a continent that professes to be deeply religious, yet sorely tried by myriad socio-economic, political, cultural dilemmas.

My preferred method corrects the misconception that theology is a closed enterprise bordering on the arcane. In fact, dialogue and inter-disciplinarity count as key characteristics of theological activity. A dialogical and inter-disciplinary approach allows theology to address a wider variety of contexts that inform faith and life in Africa with a greater degree of credibility and confidence. I argue for and adopt this approach without claiming that it is the only valid method of doing theology. It does not, as might be feared, collapse theology into anthropology,
sociology or religious studies. A generative contextualised theological method may raise questions that strain traditional categories; yet it neither abandons nor undervalues the rich resources of Christian tradition and Scripture. What direction this approach might take or the quality of the result it might yield in the future remains a matter for debate. It is enough to realise that unlike in the past, in today's Africa, theology works. To pay attention constantly to how and where it works appears as one of the major methodological considerations currently shaping the theological mind in Africa.