

## African Theology: Is it relevant for global Christianity?

### ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that 20% of all Christians come from Africa, most theological issues concerning African Christians do not feature prominently on the agenda of world Christianity. Is that because these issues are irrelevant to Christians outside Africa? This article claims that some of the central and most important topics on the agenda of African theology are as important to theology and Christianity outside of Africa as they are within Africa. The quest for a genuine Christian identity should take place every day in the life of every Christian anywhere in the world. The issue of translatability concerns the continuous conversion of all Christians and their cultures. And the attempts of African feminist theologians to develop a hermeneutic that allows the Word of God to speak to the victims of oppressive structures are an invitation to all theologians and Christians to genuinely open up for the transformative power of God's Word by allowing those that are not part of the dominant theological circles to add their distinctive voices to the rich diversity of Christian life and experience.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Roughly half a century has passed since a group of Roman-Catholic priests published *Des Pretres noirs s'interrogant* in 1956, an event often marked as the start of African Christian theology. In this half century a lot of work has been done: scores of African theologians have contributed to the development of African theology by studying and reflecting, by publishing articles and books, by teaching and preaching. Since by now some 400 million Christians, approximately 20% of the world total, are African Christians, and since African Christianity is growing where Western Christianity is in decline, one would assume this theological output to have a significant impact on the theological scene.

Yet most of African theology never made it to the agenda of what, for lack of a better term, I shall call 'mainline theology'. The curricula of most theological faculties and seminaries are still dominated by Western theology, Western theological issues and Western theologians. When I studied theology in the Netherlands in the 1990's there was no possibility to study African theology; subjects like Liberation theology and Feminist theology had made it to the curriculum, but not African theology. And unfortunately this is not only true of Western theological institutions: even the curricula of African seminaries are still dominated by Western theology. Equally significant is the fact that precious little of the output of African theology gets published in leading academic journals or by leading academic publishing houses; African theology is a so-called niche-market, served by specialized journals and publishers and read only by a small number of interested theologians. Is the reason for this lack of interest that African theology is irrelevant for theology and theologians outside Africa?

In 2005 I moved from the Netherlands to Africa to take up a lecturing position at a small theological seminary, where I am gradually getting acquainted with African theology. A more  
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in-depth study followed when I was invited by an American Presbyterian seminary to come and teach a four-week January term course introducing African theology. This invitation forced me to consider how best to lecture on African theology to a non-African audience of students of theology. In stead of trying to deal with the entire history and development of African theology I decided to identify a number of issues important to African theology and see whether these issues had anything to say to Western theology. The ensuing class, with 12 students enrolled in a Master's of Divinity program who had chosen this course as an elective and whose first introduction to non-Western theology it was, proved to be an interesting experience. Interesting mainly because we discovered how much African theology actually had to say to us, or to put it more accurately: how thoroughly critical African theology forced us to look at our own theology.

Upon return to Africa I felt an urge to report on this experience. But immediately the question arose of how to write that report. I am familiar with the rules and regulations of Western academic theological discourse, but for some reason that did not seem to be the appropriate medium for this message. Fortunately it was an important branch of African theology itself that provided the solution, namely African feminist theology. The 'Introduction' to the 2002 publication of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, presents a solid argument for a narrative methodology as the method of choice of African feminist theology. The argumentation will be discussed below; for now I want to take this lead and try to share the experience by narrating it. So this is the story of the encounter of a group of Western theologians (students of theology) with aspects of African theology and the reflection upon the relevance of that encounter.

## 2. IDENTITY

An issue that has featured prominently on the agenda of African theology from the very beginning is the question of the African Christian identity. The issue itself is well-known and quickly explained. The Gospel came to Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth century through the missionary work of people who in general had very little regard for African culture and African traditional religiosity. A classic example of this negative approach is the 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, where strategies were discussed regarding the spread of Christianity to the non-Christian world. It was agreed that African Traditional Religion, which was labelled 'Animism', was the religion of more or less backward and degraded peoples, had practically no religious content, and could therefore not be seen to be a preparation for Christianity in any sense. In this approach the missionaries simply proved themselves to be children of their time: a millennium of Christian presence in Europe had led to a thorough identification of Christianity with Europe, in the sense that being Christian meant being European, and the spectacular developments of the nineteenth century in science, industry, economy, etc., only added to the sense of European superiority and ethnocentrism. The result of this European ethnocentric missionary approach was that for Africans to become Christians they first had to become Europeans.

The fact that Christianity came in a package deal with European culture confronted converted Africans with a painful identity crisis: is it possible to be both authentically African and genuinely Christian? In order to be able to respond positively to this question, it is necessary to claim that conversion does not inevitably mean a denial of one's own culture, or to put it in different terms, that the Gospel and traditional culture are not mutually exclusive. The resultant debate on the continuity between Christianity and African traditional culture and religiosity has led African theologians to a range of different positions. An early defender of continuity was the Nigerian theologian Bolaji Idowu, who basically dissolved Christianity in traditional religiosity by claiming

that African traditional religion “is *the* religion of the majority of Africans today”, often professed overtly but equally often resorted to by those who outwardly profess faith in other religions (Idowu 1973: 208). An opposite position was taken by the Nigerian evangelical theologian Byang Kato, who rejected every attempt to identify elements of continuity between African traditional religiosity and the Bible as forms of syncretism that are alien to Biblical revelation, and who therefore proclaimed a radical discontinuity between traditional religion and culture and the new Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nowadays most African theologians take a kind of middle position between these two extremes. A representative example is the Gambian Lamin Sanneh, who claims that the missionary enterprise was based on “the assumption that the God whom the missionary came to serve had actually preceded him or her in the field and that to discover His true identity the missionary would have to delve deep into the local culture. It is the hidden reality of this divine presence that both validates external mission and requires translation as a *sine qua non* of witness. Thus the central categories of Christian theology – God, creation, Jesus Christ, and history (‘the world’) – are transposed into their local equivalents, suggesting that Christianity had been adequately anticipated.” (Sanneh 1983: 166) To illustrate the point that God was present in Africa before the missionaries came reference is often made to the fact that while translating the Bible in vernacular languages the name for God was almost always rendered by the name already in use for the worship of a Supreme Being. Andrew Walls narrates how the missionary Robert Moffat, while translating the Bible into Setswana, discovered that God already had a Tswana name, Modimo. Walls understands this as a fairly unique development: nothing “in the Christian experience in the West suggest any easy identification between the God of Christian worship and any entity in the pre-Christian past”. And it is a development with far-reaching theological implications: “the God of Israel and the Scriptures belongs conceptually to the African past”. This and other similar examples put Walls squarely on the side of those looking for continuity between Africa’s pre-Christian culture and religion and the newly arrived Christianity: “It has, in fact, only been possible [for Africans] to be more fully Christian by more fully entering into the African inheritance” (Walls 2002: 121, 133).

There has always been an interest in questions of identity and the issue of the relation between gospel and culture in Western theology, especially in missiological circles. But, as Wagenaar in a very interesting article on the theology of Kwame Bediako correctly observes, this interest has preferably been focused on “far away and exotic places or related to the ‘non-indigenous’ churches” (Wagenaar 1999: 374). Wagenaar himself tries to apply Bediako’s quest for a theological paradigm that will allow African Christians to be authentic Africans and true Christians to the European history of mission: what was, during the first centuries of Christianity in Western Europe, the missionary attitude towards the indigenous cultures and traditional religions of the Germanic tribes. A similar historical approach can be found in a book by Dutch missiologist Anton Wessels with the fascinating title *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian?*, a book in which Wessels studies the history of missions in Europe in order to learn lessons for contemporary Christian mission.

However, the question could be raised whether the African identity issue has something more existential to say to Western Christians and theologians. What would happen if we simply adopted the same question and would ask whether it is possible to be both authentically Western and genuinely Christian? This is a question that does not feature on the Western theological agenda, because we still seem to assume the harmony between Christianity and Western culture in the Western Christian identity as a self-evident and therefore not problematic fact, but my claim is that such an assumption is a mistake. In an article on the relationship between Black and African theology, the South-African bishop Desmond Tutu raised the African Christian identity problem in a poignant manner: “The fact is that, up to fairly recently, the African Christian has suffered

from a form of religious schizophrenia. (...) The white man's largely cerebral religion was hardly touching the depths of his African soul; he was being given answers, and often splendid answers, to questions he had not asked." (Tutu 1975: 26) Leaving aside the question whether the religious schizophrenia of the African Christian is indeed a thing of the past, as Tutu seems to claim, his description of the identity problem is in a different way but nonetheless equally true for Western Christians: Western theology is providing Western Christians with answers to questions they are not (or no longer) asking, and the flipside of that same coin is that theology is not addressing the issues that matter to most Christians. When Christians come to church on Sunday morning they hear sermons on the proper understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit or on the fact that Christ has truly risen; yet they are longing not for a proper understanding but for a genuine experience of the working of the Holy Spirit in their life; they have heard before that Christ has truly risen, but why does nobody show them what it means to live a resurrected life? When Christian men and women come to seminary to be trained for the ministry, they are thoroughly initiated in the intricacies of the Trinitarian doctrine and its development through the ages, as well as in all the rules and regulations that govern our congregational life; however, when we fail to initiate them into a Trinity that is not a doctrine but a life of love, community and fellowship, very soon there will be no congregations left to rule and regulate. Martin Luther already taught us some 500 years ago that "it is through living, indeed through dying and being damned that one becomes a theologian, not through understanding, reading, or speculation" – why then do we still train people for theology and ministry not by living but by understanding, reading and speculation? Why do we proclaim the Word of the living God as if it was some intellectual or moral code for proper conduct in congregational life?

Fascinating discussions ensued in the seminary course on African Theology when we tried to create unity, or at least: less tension, between our two separate identities, our dual citizenship, one belonging to Western culture and the other to Christ. Is it, for example, possible to live a Christian life in the shadow of Huntsville? (The course took place at a seminary in Texas in the United States. Huntsville is the town where the Texas State Penitentiary is located, accommodating the death row inmates and the execution chamber of the state of Texas. Texas is the state with the highest number of executions in the United States: between 2000 and 2009 a total of 232 inmates were executed.) Is it possible to be on the one hand part of a culture that eliminates unwanted elements on an almost industrial scale and in an utterly inhumane fashion, and simultaneously be an inhabitant of a Kingdom that is governed by the rules of love, grace, compassion and forgiveness? Another example: when one is aware of the economical and ecological issues at stake in our life style (and remember that the classes took place in a country that consumes 40% of the earth's resources while only representing 6% of the world population, where questions like these are bound to have some impact, and, I would like to add, are supposed to have some impact), can one still say grace over the steak one has for supper? Or is an inevitable conclusion of reading the Gospel in western society that one becomes vegetarian?

These fairly arbitrary examples are not supposed to create the impression that we were looking for easy solutions or that we were claiming to know exactly what should be done in response: if the discussions in class have made one thing abundantly clear it is that we are confronted here with extremely difficult and painful questions, questions however that are closely related to our Christian identity and that for that reason can not be ignored. In a reflective paper one of the participating students wondered whether Christianity can be truly integrated into our way of life: "if (Christianity) is inherently counter-cultural can it ever fully become the culture of a people?" (Lozano 2008: 6). And I assume the only correct answer to this question is: no. Christianity is not supposed to dissolve completely into any people's culture; it is supposed to be counter-cultural.

In an interesting article on culture and conversion Andrew Walls distinguishes two opposing forces in the history of Christianity and the Church. The first one is the “indigenizing” principle: God accepts us as we are, which means that He accepts us including our culture, since we are inseparable from the culture that determines and conditions us. A result of this first principle is that we are justified in our attempts to make Christianity “a place to feel at home”. There is, however, an opposing Gospel principle, the “pilgrim” principle: God accepts us as we are in order to transform us into what He wants us to be (Walls 1996: 53-4). And it is this “pilgrim” principle that calls us away from everything that is self-evident, logical and indisputable in our culture but that runs counter to the logic of the Gospel. That calls us, for example, away from (support of) the death penalty because the Gospel preaches forgiveness not condemnation. And this, of course, is not only true for American Christians: if we want to take serious not only our cultural identity but also (or maybe: first and foremost) our Christian identity, similar painful decisions regarding life style, political choices, ecological standpoint, economical practices, etc., are awaiting all of us. Because being a Christian is not (only) about creating a comfortable place to feel at home, it is (also) about taking up the cross to follow Christ (Mat. 16: 24).

### 3. TRANSLATABILITY

As stated above the identity issue is the outcome of the fact that missionary Christianity came in a package deal with European culture. The dominant view on the history of Western missionary activity in Africa is that mission arrived in Africa in the slipstream of colonialism, and that the missionary movement, as collaborator of the colonialists, is co-responsible for the destruction of traditional indigenous African cultures.

In *Translating the Message* (1989) missiologist Lamin Sanneh takes a quite remarkable and interesting opposing stand. In this study of the history of Christian mission and of the impact of missionary activity on culture he first distinguishes two approaches to mission:

“One is to make the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. This we might call mission by *diffusion*. By it religion expands from its initial cultural base and is implanted in other societies primarily as a matter of cultural identity. Islam (...) exemplifies this mode of mission. It carries with it certain inalienable cultural assumptions, such as the indispensability of its Arabic heritage in Scripture, law, and religion. The other way is to make the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation, so that the religion arrives without the presumption of cultural rejection. This we might call mission by *translation*. It carries with it a deep theological vocation, which arises as an inevitable stage in the process of reception and adaptation. (...) Mission as translation is the vintage mark of Christianity.” (Sanneh 1989: 29)

In Sanneh’s view translatability is not limited to the technical act of translating the Scriptures in indigenous languages, but has a wider, cultural impact: mission by translation relativises the missionary culture and destigmatises and thus promotes the recipient indigenous culture. “Missionary adaptation of the vernacular, therefore, was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism.” (: 3) The feature of translatability that is inherent to Christianity and results in far-reaching indigenous assimilation helps Sanneh to understand “the momentous outpouring of Christian conversion throughout the continent, suggesting that missionaries were effective in their conditioning of the vernacular environment rather than in their making of Christianity a photocopy of its Victorian version” (: 5). In his book he then proceeds to connect this feature of translatability with issues such as cultural

self-understanding, vernacular pride, social awakening, religious renewal, etc. It is clear that, contrary to prevailing views, Sanneh evaluates Western missionary activities and the missionary impact on indigenous cultures positively.

Sanneh's proposal has been hailed as "a most stimulating contribution" (Bediako 1995: 119) and criticized as a cover-up that "will fail to persuade Africans" (Maluleke 1996: 10). Maluleke takes as point of exit of his very critical evaluation Sanneh's claim that "the subject of Western missions needs to be unhinged from the narrow colonial context and placed in the much wider setting of African culture, including the religious background of African societies" (Sanneh 1983: 165). Although he appreciates Sanneh's attempt to formulate a perspective on African Christianity "that is not too thickly clouded by the mist of colonialism", Maluleke finds the result of this attempt completely unacceptable: "It is one thing to engage in (...) the search for alternative histories of and for the oppressed. It is quite another to seek such histories in order to let the oppressors of the hook, which is what Sanneh effectively does." Maluleke accuses Sanneh of concealing or even excusing the shortcomings of the missionaries (he refers to their racism and ethnocentrism and to the genocide of the imperialists, the rape of people and environment) by claiming that the gospel was still proclaimed. This distinction between Christianity (as an instrument at the service of colonial and cultural imperialists) and the Gospel (as the proclamation of liberation from oppression) is a form of neo-docetism that only serves as a tranquilizer for a guilt-stricken Christian West, according to Maluleke. He further argues that Sanneh's concept of translatability as a central feature of Christianity and his application of this concept as key to understanding Christian missionary history is unbalanced and one-sided: "(...) some ideologies canonized and froze (Christianity) into a solid and hegemonic orthodoxy. The very fact that we can speak of orthodoxy in Christian theology is proof of the fact that the translation logic can be arrested – for centuries at least." (Maluleke 1996: 8-10)

Maluleke's sharp criticism, it seems to me, is not entirely appropriate. The intention of Sanneh's methodological proposal, if I understand him correctly, is not "to let the oppressors of the hook" but to arrive at a balanced assessment of the missionary legacy. By claiming that, of the two processes at work in Christianity, namely historical transmission and indigenous assimilation, it is the latter that is most significant (Sanneh 1983: 166), and subsequently emphasizing the central and vital importance of the process of assimilation for African Christianity and African culture, Sanneh is not dismissing "the shortcomings of the missionaries" (Maluleke 1996: 9): "Even from the sternest view of the role of missionaries in Africa, we have to recognize the immense contribution to the revitalization of Africa" that the missionary enterprise represents despite the shortcomings of the missionaries (Sanneh 1989: 167). Emphasizing one element in the missionary story does not necessarily result in ignoring or concealing another element in the same story, as Maluleke seems to imply.

The second part of Maluleke's argument, however, does bring us back to what we set out to do, namely to allow African theology to confront Western Christians and theologians with some existential questions. One of the dangers inherent to the fundamental translatability of the Gospel is indeed that the translation logic can be frozen and that we abuse our particular interpretation of Christian identity to justify our own (social, economic, political, and ecological) interests. Church history offers prime examples: the Reformation could very well be interpreted as a protest against a specific construal of Christian identity that was arrested for centuries only to serve the interest of the status quo. But it might of course be that present-day Christian practices offer good examples as well.

To clarify the issue further we can approach it from a different angle. In various articles and essays Andrew Walls has emphasized, like Sanneh, the importance of the concept of translatability for the history and transmission of the Christian faith, and he links this importance

to the centrality within the Christian faith of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Walls claims that whereas at the heart of religions like Judaism and Islam is the prophetic word of God speaking to humanity, at the heart of the Christian faith is the incarnate Word of God becoming human, and he considers the incarnation thus as an act of translation. "Christian faith (...) rests on a massive divine act of translation, and proceeds by successive lesser acts of translation into the complexes of experiences and relationships that form our social identities in different parts of the world (...)" (Walls 1996: 47) He then goes on to relate this concept of translation as incarnation to conversion: just as in the incarnation God became human in a specific time and place, in a specific language and culture, in order to transform humanity (in general, but of course always in its historical and cultural specificity), so does every successive translation bring Christ into a specific language and culture to transform it. "Conversion to Christ does not isolate the convert from his or her community; it begins the conversion of that community. (...) This means that the influence of Christ is brought to bear on the points of reference in each group. The points of reference are the things by which people know their identity and know where, and to whom, they belong." (: 51) In other words: not only the convert is being transformed, but so is his culture, or at least his relationship to this culture. Walls concludes by pointing to the fact that this is what African theology is doing now: the conversion of culture. I would like to use this idea to reflect on Christianity in Western culture.

A heated debate ensued in class on the necessity and the possibility of transforming culture and society in line with Christian convictions, because the implications of this kind of conversion can come uncomfortably close to our personal life. Some students raised the issue of how American supermarkets are stocked with cheap products that are produced by and for the American market under the protection of significant subsidies and high tariff walls. American consumers are thus able to buy cheap, and American producers are able to make a living, but only at the detriment of producers from outside the United States, like small Latin-American or African farmers, who are unable to compete with these subsidies and unable to combat the tariff walls, and who are therefore unable to eke out a living on a market where money is to be made. (Exactly the same is true for the European market.) The issue of internal market protection by the use of subsidies and tariff walls is not only an economic issue; it is an issue with moral implications: although we don't deny the moral right of the individual to the product of his own labour, a right that brings with it the right to use it, to keep it, to give it away, and to exchange it, we create obstacles when it comes to the right to exchange and therewith we restrict the right of the individual to the product of his own labour, a fact that, from a moral perspective, constitutes theft. And since the Ten Commandments clearly prohibit theft, a Christian is called to vehemently oppose the protection of the internal market by the use of subsidies or tariff walls, for example by boycotting supermarkets that sell produce under market value. Or is he? Other students opposed this view by referring to small farmers in Texas who have a right to make a living as well, and who are utterly dependent on these protective measures in order to be able to stay in business.

The class discussions again made it clear that on the one hand there are no easy answers to these kinds of questions and on the other hand that the issues at stake are too important and too significant for our Christian identity to ignore them. As one student wrote in her reflective paper: "Humanity does not live in splendid, individual isolation, but only and ever in community and communion, for good or ill. We are dependent upon God, and interdependent with one another and all of God's creation." (Baker 2008: 7) This is a truth no Christian can argue with; the arguments start when we try to decide how this communion, how this interdependence with all creation takes shape.

In order to shed some light on the issues at stake we will use the two concepts of liberty as

developed by Isaiah Berlin (Berlin 1958). The dominant Western concept of liberty focuses on a freedom from hindrances to do what one wants and to want what one does. Western history is a history of emancipation, of liberation from the forces of oppression: prince, church, law, doctrine, illness, etc. Berlin baptizes this form of liberty 'negative liberty'. Assisted by the rapid developments of science and technology this struggle for liberation proved to be tremendously successful. Flip side of the coin, however, is that the fruits of this emancipation process more and more were considered to be not fruits to be enjoyed but entitlements to be demanded. Freedom from interference in personal choices is not a privilege or a gift but a right one is entitled to. A long and healthy life is not a blessing but a given that is expected and can be demanded. To balance this lopsided idea of freedom as entitlement Berlin introduces the concept of 'positive liberty': personal liberty and the right to self-determination are limited by the interests of others. The concept of positive liberty transforms freedom from an individual moral sentiment into a social category interested in the realization of good for myself and others without harming anyone or anything. A theological basis for this concept of freedom can be found in the conviction that freedom is always a gift of grace, a gift from the God of liberation: "The law of freedom derives from the grace of deliverance" (Moltmann 2009: 76).

In this approach our personal freedom is linked with the responsibility of using it in such a way that it doesn't harm others, or, positively, in such a way that others benefit. This could for example mean that we are not entitled to protect our market by the use of subsidies and tariff walls because these protective measures are harmful to others. But the list of possible implications will presumably encompass our entire life and our entire culture, because our conversion does not only result in a transformation of our personal life, but in a transformation of the culture that surrounds us. And here again the process of (cultural) conversion bears a striking resemblance with the process of translation: just like a translation, no matter how good, is never good enough but will always in time be in need of revision, so our conversion and the conversion of our culture is a process that is never finished.

#### 4. AFRICAN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Both the issues of identity and of translatability have been put on the agenda of African theology by male theologians whose main arguments are the validity of African Christianity and the legitimacy of African culture. Because of this programmatic perspective these theologies do not tend to be highly critical of African Christianity and culture. And exactly here lies the importance of African Feminist Theology: "This theology is mounting a critique of both African culture and African Christianity in ways that previous African theologies have not been able to do. (...) African womanist theologians are teaching us how to criticize African culture without denigrating it (...)" (Maluleke 1997: 22)

For decades the contribution of African women to African theology has been overshadowed by an academic theological scene dominated by male theologians like the aforementioned Bediako and Sanneh. The only woman to receive some attention was Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who was known especially through her work for the World Council of Churches. Oduyoye also initiated the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, an organization most African female theologians associate themselves with. The theme of the first conference of the Circle in 1989 was 'Talitha Cum!', a theme and title that is programmatic: like the nameless daughter of Jairus the nameless women of Africa are challenged to arise and speak out. Since 1989 the Circle meets regularly to discuss research papers, the best of which are subsequently published, thus providing women with an accessible forum to publish their work.

In a contribution to one of the Circle publications, *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women*



of *Faith in Africa*, Nyambura Njoroge shows that Oduyoye's initiatives did not entirely drop out of thin air. Njoroge identifies four movements that have served as "important vehicles of women's theological voices and their quests for wholeness" (Njoroge 2002: 42): the missionary movement has helped women discover their own voices and thus nurturing their self-confidence; the feminist movement has helped women to develop their political as well as their religious consciousness in the struggle for liberation and freedom from patriarchy, hierarchy, sexism, racism and economic exploitation; the ecumenical movement named men and women equally as constituent members of the Church as the body of Christ and allowed women's issues a place on the ecumenical and theological agenda; the liberation movement helped expose the damage done by cultural, political and religious imperialism. Despite the positive contributions of these four movements, women continue to be marginalized and subjugated in church and theology and therefore "African women have found it necessary to articulate their theological voices and to construct a platform for action in the Circle" (: 49).

Formulated like this, it becomes clear that African feminist theology is not only a branch of African theology, but within that theology clearly a specimen of liberation theology. Oduyoye identifies a number of characteristics of African feminist theology that emphasize this motive of liberation. In the first place it is a theology of relations, looking for "what enhances, transforms and promotes in such a way as to build community and make for life-giving and life-enhancing relationships" (Oduyoye 2001: 16). Secondly there is the consistent attempt to construct contextual theology: "There is also a conscious effort to develop what is liberative in response to the social changes that challenge life in Africa." (: 17) Included in this liberative perspective is a critique of dominant male African culture. And finally African feminist theology has an outspoken preference for the use of narrative methodology in theology (:17). The preference for this narrative method is explained in the 'Introduction' to the Circle publication *Her-stories*, where stories are identified as a major source for theology because they serve five purposes. First they complement African church history by acknowledging the often ignored role of women in building African church and society. In doing so the stories revise unbalanced perspectives and offer women a chance to reclaim their own voice and reshape their identity. Participation in story telling tends to shift the position of women from being observers and victims to being participants and actors in history. The telling of (often painful) stories aims at having a therapeutic effect on both narrator and reader/listener. And finally stories contribute to the transformation of church and society. (Phiri et.al. 2002: 4-9) The narrative methodology is a logical choice of method since it is the way African mothers have always told stories to their children, and the important functions of this kind of storytelling (such as remembrance, warning, teaching and lending meaning) serve the project of African feminist theology very well. Moreover, the narrative methodology provides African feminist theology with a unique voice in an academic theological discourse that is white and male dominated. Africans have inherited Western ways of theologizing, and women have inherited masculine forms of theologizing. The choice for a methodology that is distinctly different from the ones used by male academics is a deliberate choice: it serves to ensure that the female voice is not drowned in mainstream academia. "This is important because the object of African women's theology is not just to dialogue in the academy (though this is important) but also to begin to change history (that is to start a process of transformation within our societies)." (: 10)

A convincing practical example of this kind of theologizing is Njoroge's Bible study on the story of Rizpah (II Sam. 21: 9-14). Looking for a metaphor that would lead to new engagement in restoring human dignity and respect for life amidst the violence and destruction of Africa's modern history she found in Rizpah a companion who opened her eyes and helped her articulate the plight of the African continent. Rizpah, a concubine of king Saul, gets crushed between the

powers that be when her two sons are handed over by Saul's successor David to the Gibeonites to be killed as a reparation for the injustice done by Saul to the Gibeonites. Rizpah keeps vigil with the bodies of her children, and in doing so forces David to right his wrongs by allowing them to be properly buried. According to Njoroge, both the image of Rizpah as a victim and of the defiant Rizpah in sackcloth "capture vividly the plight of the African woman who has refused to accept violence and death as a way of life" (Njoroge 2001: 74). And instead of a metaphor Njoroge found a spirituality of resistance and transformation in Rizpah, in other women in the biblical narrative, and in the women of Africa "who keep the African spirit going in the darkest of days, when the demons are released and destruction wipes away so many of their children" (: 78). This spirituality (and the ensuing theology) aims mainly at transforming society, and its worth is to be measured by the impact it has in this regard.

When reading this text in class we discovered that it impacted on Western theology in at least two different ways. The first discovery is the impact of the Biblical hermeneutics Njoroge applies, and the second has to do with dominant academic theological discourse.

Njoroge works with a hermeneutic that is keenly aware of the fact that both the Bible and African culture are not gender neutral: culture and religion can serve (and have served) as a source of oppression and dehumanization and as a source of inspiration. Njoroge considers the Bible to be the main source of inspiration, but is nevertheless confronted with texts and traditions of interpretation that are patriarchal and oppressive. A central issue of her hermeneutics of suspicion of male domination and liberation of women is the authority of the biblical narrative, and Njoroge responds to this issue by identifying the almost completely forgotten and ignored character of Rizpah and by using her story to shed new light on the biblical narrative and on the plight of African women today. Like Rizpah the African woman is spoken for and commented on while remaining faceless and voiceless, yet like Rizpah the African woman turns out to be a defiant woman who refuses to be ignored. The powerful centrality of the story opens up the possibility of identification, for Njoroge identification between Rizpah and present-day African women, for readers of Njoroge identification with those African women. As one student writes: "In reflecting on the class, I realized that it was not until we read Nyambura J. Njoroge that I became personally connected to my African sisters (and brothers). In trying to understand why that was, I kept coming back to the image of an African mother sitting on her *kanga* protecting her dying children from the world that surrounds and threatens them. It was this image that moved my understanding of Africans as being a distant body of people from whom I was disconnected to being my brothers and sisters whose lives are bound up with my own. In part this image allowed my spirit to shift because of the common ground I share with that mother. I could imagine (of course only in part) what it would feel like to sit protecting the dying body of my daughter and feel a very raw empathy as I faced that scene." (Lozano 2008: 2) And as a result of this identification the same centrality of the story paves the way for possibilities of transformation: "I immediately connected Rizpah's story and the story of the African woman and her *kanga* to the stories of other women whose paths I have crossed, such as a group of women in El Salvador who I met when I was 13. They had formed the group Co-Madres (Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador) in response to the disappearance of their sons and husbands at the hands of death squads in the midst of their country's civil war. In order to protect and honour the bodies, the lives of their children and loved ones, these women were persecuted, tortured and killed as they challenged the powers that be. As a woman it is important for me to know these stories of women who have come before me. They are stories that should be passed down from generation to generation, they are our inheritance, for they help us to understand what it means to be a woman. Yet, they are all too often forgotten." (: 3-4) Since Western theology and Western Christians have

also inherited the patriarchal and oppressive traditions of interpretation it is important to allow African feminist theology to educate us on alternative use of the biblical narrative in order to allow us to be addressed not only by a small and distorted portion but by, if possible, the fullness of God's Word.

A second discovery is how the narrative methodology can function as a viable and important alternative to the dominant academic theological discourse. This discourse has a tendency to exclude everybody who does not play exactly by the rules of the game, rules that have been decided by dominant (often male) academic theologians. A result of this tendency is that African theology has a hard time to be heard: Western academic journals and printing presses are not really open for African theologians, often arguing that the academic quality is substandard, which presumably means that it is not written according to Western academic standards (which might of course be exactly the point). But it is not just non-Western theologians that experience difficulties in theological communication: "The fact that (African feminist theology) affirms the use of story as a vital means of theological communication was liberating for me. I communicate in story. I come to understand through experience. I have often struggled to fully grasp Western theological material and have rarely felt like I have anything to contribute to my previous theology classes, because they are predominantly grounded in a masculine Western perspective. In the West, theology is written and discussed primarily in the abstract and while I have been able to grab hold of most of it for the purposes of an exam, it has been difficult to fully embrace it personally and integrate it into a life of ministry. Instead of feeling inferior, I now can claim that I am simply different; I learn differently, I process differently, but that is not a liability. It is born out of who I am, it is a valid way of engaging theologically, and it will be an asset in many ministerial contexts." (: 3) A theological discourse that has as its sole *raison d'être* to serve as a tool for the expression of theological reflection but that fails to provide exactly this service to the vast majority of its prospective users is in dire need of revision. A non-Western theological proposal like that proposed by Njoroge and African feminist theology might provide important suggestions for this revision.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that 20% of all Christians come from Africa, most issues concerning African Christians do not feature prominently on the agenda of world Christianity. And despite the fact that a significant number of African theologians for over 50 years now produce a steady flow of articles and books reflecting on these issues, most of them never get published in the leading academic journals or by the leading academic publishing houses. Is that because Africa's theological output is irrelevant to Christians outside Africa?

This article claims that the opposite is true: African theology, or to be more precise: some of the central and most important topics on the agenda of African theology are as important to theology and Christianity outside of Africa as they are within Africa. I have argued for this claim by taking a look at three issues that feature high on the agenda of African theology today and then discussing the possible impact of those issues for Western theology and theologians. The struggle for a genuine Christian identity by African Christians is not (only) the struggle between a pre-Christian past and a Christian present taking place in far-away and exotic places that have just recently made the move from paganism to Christianity; it is a quest that takes place (or at least should take place) every day in the life of every Christian anywhere in the world. The issue of the translatability of the gospel is not (just) an issue in the historical debate on the missionary movement and its heritage in the translation of the Bible; it is an issue that concerns the conversion of individuals and their cultures, a conversion that is never perfected and therefore never finished, not even (or maybe: certainly not) in cultures that have been Christianized many

centuries ago and now deem their status as 'Christian cultures' to be self-evident. And the attempts of African feminist theologians to develop a hermeneutic that allows the Word of God, despite the fact that it is thoroughly wrapped in oppressive patriarchal structures, to speak to those who are the victims of these oppressive patriarchal structures,—these attempts are not only relevant to these African women; they are an invitation to all theologians and Christians to genuinely open up for the transformative power of God's Word by allowing those that are not part of the dominant theological circles to add their distinctive voices to the rich diversity of Christian life and experience, an addition that will enrich not only academic theology.

For a Western theology and a Western Christianity that is, generally speaking, in need of revitalization, this might be an invitation that should not be ignored.

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## KEY WORDS

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