

An ecumenical framework in Mbiti's African theology

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Abstract

This study discusses the theological framework of John Mbiti's African theology. It has identified Konrad Raiser's "Ecumenical paradigm" as a framework within which to conceptualize and understand Mbiti's theological works, approach, and perspectives. The study argues that Mbiti works with an ecumenical paradigm and framework of African religion(s) and culture. Raiser's metaphor of "One Household of Life", is an important theological conceptual tool to try to grasp Mbiti's approach and methodology. Taking an ecumenical approach, Raiser argues the importance of religions and faith confessions of engaging in dialogue and communication. Behind dialogue, lies the more critical question of the authority of the local context and religions, in relations to Western Christianity. Mbiti wrestles with the question: what authority does African Tradition Religion (ATR) have in relation to Western Christianity, and other religions? Further the study, highlights that there are two principles that are at work in Mbiti's theological framework and approach, namely, the local in relation to the universal, and the normative in relation to the relative, which can also be understood as the absolutizing in relation to the relativizing.

Keywords

African; Christianity; culture; dialogue; ecumenical; framework; household; life; Mbiti; theology

Theoretical considerations – Konrad Raiser's "One Household of Life"

Arguing for the importance of an open dynamic ecumenical dialogue among churches in the world, Konrad Raiser, Secretary General of the World Council of Churches (1993–2002), used the metaphor of "One Household of

Life.”¹ He employed the metaphor of the “Old Testament household of God” in relation to the whole creation as a framework for dynamic ecumenical relationships.² For Raiser, two concepts, namely, the Jewish notion of the temple and sanctuary characterized the essence of “household of God.” At the core of this concept, was the sanctuary, and later on the temple.³ However, more critically, Raiser framed the “One Household of Life” in the Israelite covenant theology. So, he argues, “Israel’s covenant with God is the guarantor of the life of ordinances of the household of Israel and of the whole creation. God dwells in the house of Israel.⁴ More significantly, Raiser, links “One Household of life” with “space for living.” According to Raiser, “Oikos as a “space for living” draws a boundary around itself, but at the same time enables relationships to be formed.”⁵

Raiser’s “One Household of Life” may be encapsulated in Mbiti’s famous adage, “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore, I am,”⁶ which stresses the uniqueness of a human being as a “person” in relation to human or cultural “diversity.” It underscores both collectivity and corporality as the core values of an African way of life. It is the linchpin of his theology.

In this respect, the collective defines the life of an individual; hence, it is only in the community that the individual draws meaning from. It is Mbiti’s basic African philosophical principle. What this entails is that interpersonal relationships constitute the essence of human life in Africa. As social systems, and structures, African cultures, and traditions, operate within frameworks which influence interactions with other social systems.

This study will show that the “One Household of Life” is a missiological framework within which Mbiti’s African Christian theology can be understood. It will illustrate that Mbiti’s theology is ecumenical, one that seeks to encompass rather than exclude; it is open to dialogue with living

1 Konrad Raiser, “The Oikoumene”: The One Household of Life,” in *Ecumenism in Transition: a Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), Chapter 4.

2 Raiser, “The Oikoumene”, 89.

3 Ibid., 89.

4 Ibid., 89.

5 Ibid., 88.

6 Ibid., 88.

global cultures and religions. At the core of his theology is the quest for an open rather than closed dialogue, a theology that is pluriverse.

Raiser asserts that the Oikos is a space for living that draws a boundary around itself but at the same time enables relationships to be formed.⁷ “The space of the living person is always enclosed space ... But the enclosure of the space moulded by human life does not merely protect and does not merely repulse. At the same time, it means a possibility of communication with neighbouring human beings and their environments. It evokes neighbourliness ... Every frontier enclosing the living space of a living thing is an open frontier. If it is closed, the living dies.”⁸

As this study will show, the missiological term neighbourliness better encapsulates the ethos, framework, and orientation of Mbiti’s African theology. It will later be shown that Mbiti advocates an African theology that traverses boundaries of culture and religions. In his view, Mbiti asserts that African theology must be in dialogue with global cultures and religions in the spirit of neighbourhood. For African theology to be relevant it must reach out to multicultural contexts of the world. On the other hand, Raiser’s concept of open dialogue seems to be in directly in conflict with Karl Popper’s concept of ‘closed society.’⁹ Thaddeus Metz asserts that, “Popper’s political and legal philosophy ... [has] a bearing on Africa [viewed as] a closed society, where it is likely that he would have considered indigenous Sub-Saharan peoples to be instances of such.”¹⁰

He further states, “The stereotype of traditional African cultures, particularly among mid-twentieth century western intellectuals, has been that they are both tribal and collectivist, which are the defining features of a closed society.”¹¹ According to Thaddeus Metz, Karl Popper considered these structures are internally closed, hence, non-responsive to external influences, there can be no dialogue between them and others. In his view,

7 Ibid., 88.

8 Ibid., 88.

9 Thaddeus Metz, “Popper’s Politics and Law in the Light of African Values.” *Jus Cogens* 2 (2020):185–204.

10 Metz, “Popper’s Politics and Law in the Light of African Values,” 186.

11 Ibid., 186.

thought systems and cultures such as African religions and traditions fall into this category.¹²

Finally, according to Raiser, the concept of “cultures of dialogue” is critical to the metaphor of the household of God. In this respect, he links “cultures in dialogue” and Potter’s “future *oikoumene* in the language of Hebrews and Revelation ...” as an open city ... in which this universal dialogue of cultures can take place as the place, as the earth which becomes one household (*oikos*) ...¹³ From another dimension, this study will explore Mbiti’s African theology from his perspective of dialogue with global theologies and cultures. The study will illustrate that Mbiti construes an African theology as a dimension that belong to the “one Household of Life” of the global theologies, seeking to respond to the critical question of what is the meaning of life for an African? First, we start analysing the significance of the local African contexts in Mbiti’s ecumenical theology.

African theology in relation to global contexts

Mbiti’s point of departure in his African theology is the significance of the local African contexts – relationally to the Biblical worldview, and, or of the Western worldview. Thus, precisely because of this, so Mbiti denotes that African theology is a “theological reflection and expression by African Christians.”¹⁴ This local context is not only the base but also the foundation, and the pillar of an African theology and spirituality. Thus, Mbiti retorts, “Christianity has Christianized Africa, but Africa has not yet Africanized Christianity”. Because of his concern for the role of the African contexts with regard to the African Church as “the “[African] Church without a theology, without theologians, and without theological concern.”¹⁵

Hence, for an authentic spirituality, Mbiti argues that the gospel and Christianity have to be deeply rooted within “the point of African

12 Ibid.

13 Raiser, “The Oikoumene,” 82.

14 John S. Mbiti, “The biblical basis in present trends in African theology.” *African Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (1978), 72.

15 Mbiti, “The biblical basis in present trends in African theology,” 72.

religiosity”¹⁶, and the African should be free to express the Christian gospel, which remains basically universal and the same for all times, within the African language and cultural context that is the “medium of receiving, diffusing, tuning in and relaying the gospel”.¹⁷ The principal concern of African theology is clearly to communicate the gospel to the African people in “a manner suitable to African conditions and background.”¹⁸

The “ecumenical” nature of divine revelation

Mbiti is an “ecumenical” African theologian who has defined an African worldview as intrinsically communitarian, collective and holistic. His ecumenical approach to revelation and theology rests on his concept of God. In his article, “The Encounter of Christian Faith and Religion”, he asserted that, “The missionaries who introduced the gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God. Instead, God brought them, for the God described in the Bible is none other than the God who was already known in the framework of our traditional African religiosity.”¹⁹ Hence, for Mbiti, God is universal, and therefore, his revelation is universal too. This universalistic framework is ecumenical: it accommodates many “households” of cultures. It creates multiple spaces and frameworks for dialogue. In this respect, divine revelation is all encompassing, broad, rather than narrow. In this framework, for Mbiti, the Judeo-Christian revelation constitutes the core of primordial history in Africa. Under the subheading, “A God Already Known,” he states:

Since the Bible tells me that God is the Creator of all things, his activities in the world must clearly go beyond what is recorded in the Bible. He must have been active among African peoples as he was

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- 16 John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and traditional religions in Africa.” *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970), 430.
- 17 John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and African culture.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 20 (1977), 27.
- 18 John S. Mbiti, “Some African concepts of Christology.” in G.F. Vicedom (ed.), *Christ and the younger churches: Theological contributions from Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (London: S.P.C.K, 1972), 53.
- 19 John Mbiti, “The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion (1980)”, *Religion Online*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-encounter-of-christian-faith-and-african-religion/>.

among the Jewish people. Did he then reveal himself only in the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and other personalities of the Bible? Didn't our Lord let it be clearly known that "before Abraham was I am" (Jn 8:58)? Then was he not there in other times and in such places as Mount Fuji and Mount Kenya, as well as Mount Sinai? The decisive word here is "only."²⁰

Thus, for Mbiti, revelation "inhabits the whole earth," it is universalistic and yet unique in each local context. It is accessible to all because its revealer is omnipresent. So, Mbiti asserts that African religions mirrors Judeo-Christian revelation. In other words, African religions are not a pale shadow of the former, rather they clearly reflect them, they are pointers to the former. To put it in other words, African religions lead one to the source. He went on to assert that,

I find the traditional Western distinction between "special revelation" and "general revelation" to be inadequate and un freeing. This is not a biblical distinction. If they are two wavelengths, they make sense only when they move toward a convergence. When this happens, then a passage such as Hebrews 1:1–3 rolls down like mighty waters, full of exciting possibilities of theological reflection.²¹

For Mbiti, each religion in a local context is relative to the special revelation deposited in the Judeo-Christian tradition to the extent that the Judeo-Christian religion confirms the authenticity of ATR. In other words, the Judeo-Christian revelation reflects is part of the global "ecumenical houses" of religion and cultures. The local religions and cultures confirm the authenticity of the universalistic Judeo-Christian revelation. In other words, the relationship between the two is dialogical. These local religions bear testimony to the authenticity of Judeo-Christian revelation, vice versa. The principle of relativism is at work in this respect; one relates to the other. It in this respect, ecumenical dialogue becomes imperative since there are inherent commonalities between the two.

Thus, Mbiti's theological framework seem to fit within an inclusive "theology of religion," particularly from the perspectives of Karl Rahner.

20 Mbiti, "The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion."

21 Ibid.

In contrast to the Exclusivist Model, associated with Karl Barth, which sees no salvation outside (mainstream) Christianity,²² Mbiti's conception would fit in with the Rahner's Fulfilment model, which construes the adherents of other religions, notably ATR as "anonymous Christians."²³ Thus, this model would tend to confirm Mbiti's view that some salvific values in the Christian Faith find expression in the African heritage (ATR).

For Mbiti, therefore, ATRs are not just an ecumenical bridge towards the Christian faith, and other religions, but an *evangelica preparatio* of Christianity. They fulfil a crucial role even in trying to understand the essence of Christianity. They are not closed systems, as Karl Popper, would assert, but rather "open structures" amenable to interaction with other religions. They are "rooms" within "global houses of religion." They are "mirrors" that reflect some values of Hebrew revelation.

To put it in other words, Mbiti deems that the relationship between African religions and Christianity opens up possibilities for a serious dialogical encounter between them. African religions and Christianity belong to one "ecumenical household" in which they interact not as strangers, not as rivals, or foes but rather as neighbourly sisters. In this respect, the "hidden Christ" in African religions constitute a point of contact in its dialogical encounter with Christianity. Thus, Mbiti also contends that "the two religions [ATR and Christianity] speak a largely common language and undergird each other" and Jesus's message "does not contravene the efforts of [African] traditional religion."²⁴

The ecumenical nature of the Bible

In his "An Ecumenical Approach to Teaching the Bible," Mbiti has argued that the Bible is characteristically 'ecumenical', and consequently, is a critical resource that can enhance ecumenical initiatives among religions.

22 See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 2014), 497.

23 Ibid.

24 David T. Tarus and Stephanie Lowery, "African Theologies of Identity and Community: The Contributions of John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi, Vincent Mulago, and Kwame Bediako," *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (January 2017), 313.

On this basis, so he argues, it must be set free from North American and European baggage as it goes beyond racial, and ethnic boundaries. He states:

The Bible has now become so thoroughly ecumenical that it cannot be taught meaningfully, nor understood meaningfully, without this ecumenical perspective. We enter into the Bible as individuals, as schools of thought, church traditions or native speakers of particular languages. But when the Bible enters into us, it comes as an ecumenical and multilingual book.²⁵

In other words, for Mbiti, the Bible is a “living store house of houses.” It has “rooms” whose door is open for all cultures. Its traditions and cultures speak to cultures of the world. In this respect, translation of the Bible is a key to hermeneutical tool and process to its ecumenicity. So, he asserts,

The more languages into which the Bible is translated, the more cultures it enters. Ecumenical encounter is also encounter across cultures. The invasion of all parts of the world by the politically and technologically more powerful cultures of the West has evoked fears of cultural imperialism, the loss of cultural identity and the stigmatization of many of the other cultures as “primitive, heathen and uncivilized”. There is plenty of room for the Bible to throw light on the question of culture when the Christian faith is introduced into a given culture, as well as upon cultures which have had the gospel for many generations.²⁶

For the evangelical Mbiti, the Bible is the one heritage that makes it possible for global cross-cultural communication through translations. It brings cultures of the globe together. It builds bridges across-cultural divides. This is in keeping with Mbiti’s attitude towards the Old Testament whose values he sees reflected in some traditions of the African heritage.

25 John S. Mbiti, “An Ecumenical Approach to Teaching the Bible.” *The Ecumenical Review* 39, no.4 (1987): 404-412.

26 Mbiti, “An Ecumenical Approach to Teaching the Bible,” 411.

The ecumenical character of salvation history

Raiser’s metaphor of the “One Household of life” is crucial in trying to grasp the universalistic character of Mbiti’s ideas on salvific history. Raiser states that,

The metaphor of the Household supersedes the narrow vision that sees history as the central category of interpretation. It reminds us that human history is bound up with the history of all living things and that the human household is incapable of surviving without being related to the other households which are its natural environment. The great household of the oikoumene includes a countless variety of small and very small households, which are related to another and dependent on another.²⁷

From a similar premise, Mbiti makes a strong assertion that salvation history and revelation transcend the boundaries of Israel. Even though God revealed himself in a unique way to the Jews, nonetheless, he was involved in the histories and cultures of other peoples as well. Though centred on Israel, salvation history encompasses African people and their cultures and traditions. He stated,

Revelation is given not in a vacuum but within particular historical experiences and reflections. When we identify the God of the Bible as the same God who is known through African religion (whatever its limitations), we must also take it that God has had a historical relationship with African peoples. God is not insensitive to the history of peoples other than Israel. Their history has a theological meaning. My interpretation of Israel’s history demands a new look at the history of African peoples, among whom this same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has indeed been at work. In this case, so-called “salvation history” must widen its outreach in order to embrace the horizons of other peoples’ histories. I am not a historian, and I have not done careful thinking in this direction. But I feel that the issue of looking at African history in light of the biblical

27 Raiser, “The Oikoumene”, 88.

understanding of history is clearly called for.²⁸

It is obvious for Mbiti that while Israel's history is the centre, an African history of revelation exists in mutual relationship with that of Israel. To put it in the language of Raiser, an African history, exists as a "room" within the larger rooms of "household of life." In this relationship, an African history of revelation points to that of Israel to the extent that the latter is a mirror of the former. An African history of revelation is embedded in that of Israel.

The missionary and Biblical translation

For Mbiti, the Bible is itself a primary agent for the transformation of cultures. However, he views missionaries' attitude as antithetical to the ecumenical dimensions of the Bible. There is in this respect, tension between the missionary message, attitudes, and the message of the Bible.

... missionaries have condemned the custom of polygamous families in African and other societies where Western missionaries introduced the gospel. These same missionaries, together with their African (or other) converts, translate the Bible into local languages. Christians read it in the framework of their culture and discover, among other things, that great pillars of the faith in the Old Testament were actually polygamous – such as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David. The Bible, they see, neither encourages nor condemns polygamy – at least, seen through cultures other than Western. Single cultures may tend to blind our understanding of some parts of the Bible; ecumenical openness is certainly an enrichment in our understanding the Bible and in applying its insights. The church continues to be faced with the question of relating the gospel to culture, be that tribal settings or within the worldclass cities.²⁹

The Bible mirrors all cultures; within it all cultures have enough room; it is a kaleidoscope of cultures, and so it speaks to the "soul" of all cultures. For Mbiti, it is the "ecumenical" nature of the Bible that makes it possible

28 Mbiti, "Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion."

29 Mbiti, "An Ecumenical Approach to Teaching the Bible."

for Christianity to take the shape and form of local cultures and religions. Mbiti calls for a radical adaptation of the Bible to the local cultures. He states,

We cannot afford to read and teach the Bible as though it were exclusively a German or English or Korean or Kiswahili Bible. That would not be ecumenical but provincial; it would be not only a dull exercise, but one that leads ultimately to ecumenical malnutrition and starvation. How can we approach the Bible and teach it in a given context or situation but as a book of the whole world? Teaching the Bible is or should be the opposite of playing in the football world cup competition in which the different teams go on knocking each other out until finally one team wins the golden cup. Teaching and reading the Bible in ecumenical perspectives means that each team starts with the golden cup itself and gives others to drink the water of life out of the golden cup. It is an act of communion (*koinonia*) and not one of competition, an act of incorporating others and not one of silencing them.³⁰

The “ecumenical” perspective is the “universal imperative.” Because the Bible belongs to global humanity, it is universalistic in nature, and therefore renders it relevant to the local context. The Bible transcends global frontiers; its message takes forms and shape in the local cultural contexts. It is the ecumenical character of the Bible that makes it contextually relevant.

Ecumenical relationships between Christianity and African heritage

In Mbiti’s theology, the relationship between Christianity and ATR centres on what he perceives as the intrinsic characteristics of the two that opens the wide ecumenical room for dialogue. He raises the poignant question: has Africa made a real claim on Christianity? That is the core issue. “Christianity has Christianised Africa, but Africa has not yet Africanised Christianity.”³¹ Thus, in his view, ATRs have a “vocation” to Africanise

30 Ibid.

31 Mbiti, “Christianity and traditional religions in Africa.”

Christianity in the same manner that Greek Hellenized Christianity in the post-Apostolic Age. In fulfilling this calling, African heritage then renders service to the ecumenical world of cultures. As John Kinney asserts, “[Mbiti] is not content with seeing African Christians as carbon copies of European and American Christians and believes that Christianity is sufficiently unique and flexible to be accommodated in the African environment and that traditional religion is sufficiently compatible with Christianity to give it an African character.”³² In short, for Mbiti, ATRs have a “missionary” role of enabling Christianity experience to have an abiding home on the continent.

The primordial Christ – the centre of the “Household” in dialogue?

Cornelis van Dam considers Mbiti’s Christo-centrism of global cultures. According to van Dam, “Mbiti argues for the priority of Christ’s geographical presence in the world, rather than his chronological presence. Mission history is not so much European ideas meeting African traditions, but rather Christ meeting the religious African, according to Mbiti.”³³ In this respect, Mbiti’s ecumenical dimensions derive from his evangelical concerns. The “primordial Christ” at the very centre of the “universalistic framework,” of “dialogue of cultures.” Christ, in his view, constitutes the centre of the “household” of “households” within the framework of cultural dialogue. In this respect, it is identity in Christ that fundamentally gives meaning to the universal and local contexts.

Finally, Van Dam concludes conveying Mbiti’s thought as follows: “Jesus Christ is not a latecomer on the scene in African religious life, nor, therefore, is his gospel a subsequent arrival, that is, subsequent to our cultures. Rather, Jesus Christ and his gospel are prior, and constitute the foundation of our cultures. This is one of the implications of the Biblical proclamation of Jesus as ‘Alpha and Omega.’”³⁴

32 John Kinney, “The Theology of John Mbiti: His Sources, Norms, and Method.” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 3, no.2 (April 1979), 65.

33 C. van Dam, “Christ Coming Home, Kwame Bediako’s Oeuvre as an ‘African Christianity Project.’” (PhD, Vrije University. 2021), 112.

34 Van Dam, “Christ Coming Home,” 112.

To put it in other words, for Mbiti, the local contexts can only find meaning from the centre, the cosmic Christ. He maintains that Africans worship “One Supreme God”, and this concept and experience is common in Africa as a whole.³⁵ In trying to demonstrate the monotheistic nature of ATRs, he employs a theological framework which interprets the various African concepts of God. From this spectrum, he proceeds to show that there is a common basic structure about African peoples’ beliefs about God that makes comparison meaningful.³⁶ For Mbiti, the pervasive religious character of the ATRs is relatively unique in relation to the “universalistic” Judeo-Christian tradition. The religiosity of ATRs constitutes not only form the basis of cultural dialogue but also a point of departure: the Judeo-Christian household.

An ecumenical view of salvation

Soteriology is an important theme in Mbiti’s theology. It is at the core of his theological discussion, either, explicitly, or implicitly. In fact, it is the linchpin of his theology. However, it is important to note that he views salvation in ecumenical rather than purely in exclusive terms. While acknowledging its centrality in Judeo-Christian tradition, he also detects some salvific features in ATRs. In his view, ATRs is salvific, it holds values that are capable of drawing an African to experience God. He asserts,

The biblical record is so broad that it easily encompasses the African world. This means that when an African opens the Bible, he finds something which speaks directly to him. This is particularly so in the case of the biblical portraits of salvation which embrace several meanings that are readily applicable to the African world.³⁷

Thus, in this respect, characteristically, the Biblical message resonates with meanings and values latent in ATR and cultures. Messages and values in two religious systems speak to each other. To put it in Raiser’s term, ATRs have an ecumenical relationship with the Biblical message. Both exist as

35 J. S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970), xiii.

36 Ibid.

37 Mbiti, “Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion.”

“rooms” within the same “household of global faiths.” They are not in competition with one another, but rather complement each other. Or as Kenaleone Ketshabile asserts, for Mbiti, African religions “demonstrates that in both the biblical and African worldviews the concept of salvation has a plethora of meanings. Its meaning is not as restrictive as is often portrayed by traditional Christianity as simply a matter of preparing one’s soul for Heaven ...”³⁸

Mbiti’s suggestion that the concept of salvation takes broader dimensions than concerning spiritual matters is crucial precisely because for him the ATRs are by nature holistic, where no dichotomy exist between matter and the spirit. For Mbiti, it is the integral nature of the ATRs that give them coherence.

The indigenizing ecumenical principle

There are two correlative principles that seem to operate in Mbiti’s ecumenical theological framework, the normative, and the relative, or the absolute and the general. For Mbiti, the gospel, “independent” of culture, is normative, distinct from (Western) Christianity, which is a product of a long process of synthesizing the gospel in various global contexts. Mbiti views the Christian gospel as distinct from Christianity, the latter being a product of a tradition that developed from the former over processes of a long time. In Mbiti’s view the gospel is the kernel and the later a husk. Thus, he stated,

We can add nothing to the Gospel, for this is an eternal gift of God; but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures it encounters in its never-ending journeys and wanderings.³⁹

The gospel is unique, and hence, at the centre, while Christianity is the framework, an “ecumenical household.” In this regard, for Mbiti, Christianity, which he distinguishes from the gospel, is ecumenical; it is

38 Kenaleone F. Ketshabile, *An African Contribution to the Christian Debate on Religious* (MTh, UNISA, 1997), 49.

39 Mbiti, “Christianity and traditional religions in Africa,” 438.

always seeking to dialogue with other cultures which are themselves open to the gospel. From this perspective, Mbiti argues that African cultures and religions engage the gospel in much the same way that Western cultures and religions have done over the years. It is from this spectrum that Mbiti sees the Western Christian tradition as open to dialogue just as African religions and cultures are.

To put it in other words, African religions exist in ecumenical relationship with other religions such as Christianity precisely because of the cultural elements which constitute these systems. It is cultural features in both religious systems that act as a nexus of the ecumenical dialogue. For Mbiti, Christianity is by nature ecumenical. For Mbiti, African religions must engage Christianity. As John Kinney observed that Mbiti saw a Trinitarian task for Christian theology in Africa to retain its African and religious cultural heritage; to give Christianity an African imprint and character; and to uphold the uniqueness and Catholicity of Christianity.⁴⁰

From this spectrum, so it would seem, Mbiti's "ecumenical theology" is not at all in incongruence with Andrew Walls' indigenizing principle that views culture as the critical vehicle through which the gospel must find expression. For as Andrew Walls states, "We are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by "culture" in fact. In Christ God accepts us together with our group relations; with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home in one part of human society and less at home in another ..."⁴¹

In the same vein, however, Mbiti's theology seem to be in tension with Wall's pilgrim principle that tends to view the gospel as almost antithetical to culture. This pilgrim principle, according to Walls, asserts that Christianity "has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society ..."⁴² For Mbiti, African culture and religions are God's gift that serve as a bridge to the gospel, some critical elements of which needs to be affirmed than denigrated. In this respect, Mbiti tends to sacralise African culture.

40 Kinney, "The Theology of John Mbiti."

41 Andrew Walls, "The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture." *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission* 10, no. 3 (1982), 97.

42 "The Gospel As the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," 99.

In essence, Mbiti's "ecumenical African theology" entails what Lamin Sanneh calls translation. Even though in his book, *Translating the Message*, Sanneh does not cite Mbiti, nonetheless, his argument and discussions hinges on how the Christian gospel takes shape of the local cultures, its idioms, symbols, and values. To put it differently, Sanneh's argument is that African contexts, and cultures and symbols are capable of transforming principle Christian concepts and teachings to the extent that the gospel is fully incarnated. These scholars seem to communicate similar messages couched not in dissimilar language.

According to Sanneh, translation entails rendering and mediating the Scriptures in the language of the recipient. However, in his view, it entails deeper issues than language. He states, "translation is primarily a matter of language, but it is not only that, for language itself is a living expression of culture. Lexical resources must be deepened, with the force of usage, custom, and tradition in order to become meaningful, particularly if we want to present the dynamic quality of life".⁴³ In other words, for Sanneh, translation entails the embodiment of the gospel in a foreign culture.

In his view, African religions, cultures, and philosophies provides viable concepts and frameworks which if utilized can provide meaningful values that can transform the Christian gospel. In other words, ATRs are able of transforming the Christian gospel fundamentally in a manner that it can speak to the African context. The sort of radical pluralism represented by translatability promotes cultural particularity while affirming in God its relativizing universal.⁴⁴

An African heritage – fit to be “exported” to the world?

Mbiti's theology places an African heritage in "One [global] Household of Life". In his view, Africa is a vital component of the global household. From this viewpoint, Mbiti was convinced that African theology had reached a stage where it could contribute to the theological enterprise of the old "Christendom." He asserted that African theology had developed

43 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1989), 200.

44 Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 203.

to the extent that Western theologians equally had to learn from it. Mbiti proposed a kind of “theological pilgrimage,” a journey where Western theologians would enter the African theological world and learn from it.⁴⁵ He asked Western colleagues and theologians, the following questions:

We have eaten with you your theology. Are you prepared to eat with us our theology? ... The question is, do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically? Can you know us theologically? And how can there be true theological reciprocity and mutuality, if only one side knows the other fairly well, while the other side either does not know or does not want to know the first side.⁴⁶

It is significant that Mbiti uses African symbols of “eating” with your theology. The symbol denotes theological exercise as mutual and reciprocal and a fellowship of trust. Mbiti proposes a theological pilgrimage because in his view there was equality in status between African and European theology. African theology had come of age. He also recognized that Western theology seemed reticent to acknowledge that African theology was at par with the latter. Thus, Mbiti envisaged serious dialogue between African and Western theology where African theology was no junior partner. For Mbiti, an ecumenical dialogue between African and Western theologies was something akin to a vocation.

Babacar Mbaye has shown another ecumenical dimension of Mbiti’s work. He views Mbiti’s work as transcontinental in its dimensions. He states that Mbiti’s influence has been noted in African America and Caribbean literature and in the Black Diaspora as a whole. He asserts that, “The Africanisms in New World Black writings can easily be identified and interpreted through the use of Mbiti’s work, such as African religions and Philosophy (1970), Concepts of God in Africa (1970), and Introduction to African Religions and Philosophy (1970), and introduction to Religions.” He further asserts that,

Ethnographic theories that Mbiti develops in his scholarship can be

45 John S. Mbiti, “Dictionary of African Christian Biography.” [Online]. Available: <https://dacb.org/stories/kenya/mbiti-johns/>.

46 John S. Mbiti, “Theological Impotence and Universality of the Church,” in G. Anderson & T. Stransky (eds.), *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 17.

used to demonstrate the connections among continental African cultures and those between such continental African traditions and their equivalents in the New World.⁴⁷

Then, he concludes asserting that, “Mbiti’s theories of Africanism can also be used as a framework for developing a methodology of Pan-African literary and cultural studies that stresses the important of African worldviews in Black Diaspora literature and culture.”⁴⁸

However, Mbiti’s ecumenicity goes beyond African scholarly heritage, embracing broader social issues of human solidarity, and concern. In other words, for Mbiti, African Theology in global conversation with Christendom must lead to an engagement of broader issues of human survival and solidarity. He states,

There cannot be theological conversation or dialogue between North and South, East, and West, until we can embrace each other’s concerns and stretch to each other’s horizons. Theologians from the southern continents believe that they know about most of the constantly changing concerns of older Christendom. They would also like their counterparts from the older Christendom to come to know about their concerns of human survival.⁴⁹

In other words, for Mbiti, Africa’s involvement in the older Christendom entails a theological dialogue which underlie deep issues of human salvation. It would seem that he considers Africans’ involvement in global human affairs as a side of the same coin, a theological contribution to finding global challenges based on its heritage. The reason for this is precisely that in Mbiti’s African theology no distinction prevails between secular and sacred, no line of demarcation exists between political and spiritual matters, as one is the expression of the other. In other words, Mbiti espouses an “integrated ecumenical African theology” which operates within an ecumenical global framework. The notion of a theological

47 Barbacar Mbaye, “The Significance of John S. Mbiti’s Works in the Study of Pan-African Literature.” *Journal of Traditions and Beliefs* 2 (2016), 1.

48 Ibid.

49 John Samuel Mbiti, “Dictionary of African Christian Biography.” [Online]. Available: <https://dacb.org/stories/kenya/mbiti-johns/>

pilgrimage summarizes his African theological ecumenical framework, namely, theology is an experience in which each one encounters the “holy other.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has highlighted Mbiti’s theology as an African theology that functions within the continuum of an ecumenical framework. Employing Raiser’s ecumenical metaphor of “One Household of Life”, the study has illustrated that Mbiti’s theology seem to fit within an “open dialogue” framework of cultures, and religions. In this respect, it has been illustrated that Mbiti starts from the presumptions of the dynamics of local context(s). In his view, the local context is a unique medium of and for theological dialogues. Each cultural context is unique, but then intrinsically relative to others. In this respect, for Mbiti, two correlative principles operate within cultures, namely, the normative, which is in tension but works along with the general or universal.

For Mbiti, an African heritage is unique in the sense that even though essentially operating within the confines of local cultural frameworks, nevertheless, it is intrinsically open to dialogue with other global cultures. In this respect, African heritage and theology are not a closed system but rather their uniqueness lies in being open to dialogue with other global cultures. It is within this premise and perspective that Mbiti construes the relationship between an African heritage with Judeo-Christian theology.

For Mbiti, an African heritage is a *preparatio evangelica* precisely because it opens to dialogue with the Judeo-Christian heritage. The uniqueness of ATR as a heritage lies in its openness to dialogue with other heritages. Corollary, ecumenical heritages are unique in only as far as they relate to other local heritages. Thus, for Mbiti, an African heritage, as a value embodies theological values that transcends local limitations and boundaries. Each local context is a unique “House of life” in relation to a global “Ecumenical Household of life.” To put it in a different manner, each culture though unique, is open to “dialogue with other cultures”.

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