

AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY  
OF  
HUMAN EXISTENCE

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by

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**ABSTRACT**  
**AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF**  
**HUMAN EXISTENCE**

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This dissertation is a theology of human existence from an African Christian perspective. It is an attempt to formulate a theological anthropology relevant to Africa, one that reckons with and speaks to the worldview of Africa. The thesis of the work is that the meaning of human life is to be found in the relationship of man with God and with fellow human beings and that relationship should be reflected in spiritual, social, cultural, economic and political aspects of human life.

Through a description, analysis and critique of the traditional theologies of man, with concentration on the thoughts of Aurelius Augustine and Paul Tillich, the essay affirms the traditional viewpoint that the creation of man in the image of God is the focus of the biblical, Christian understanding of man. However, it argues that the theological explanation of man should not be limited to the study of the relationship of man to God and about his spiritual life. Rather, since the image of God is a community concept, man is also equally to be understood from the viewpoint of his relationship to self, to the world, and to other human beings as shown in social, cultural, economic and political spheres of life.

One basic contention of the dissertation is that whereas man is a complex being who can be studied from different angles as done in different disciplines, the central idea of theological and traditional African understanding of man is that he is a relational, communal, social being. That understanding constitutes the major rationale for the formulation of the theology of human existence presented in this essay with the emphasis of human being in relation to God, to self, to the world, and to human beings in relation to each other. That discussion included a theological analysis of contemporary social life in Africa in its cultural, economic, and political dimensions as well as on Christian spirituality. This was followed by a presentation of the implications of this theology in contemporary Nigeria. The work concluded that a theology of human existence should aid human life, human living.

## **b. Conclusions**

Four major conclusions can be drawn from the dissertation. They will be presented one after the other.

First, theology of human existence is theological explanation of the life of man. Existence is used in the concrete African, holistic sense with emphasis on life and not Western philosophical, abstract analysis of being as it is done in existential philosophy and theology. With the understanding of existence as life, a theology of human existence should be a theology of human life, a theology for human living. A theology for living should also be a living theology.

This first conclusion is not a play on words. Existence is being and life. Every theology should be a theology of existence including a theology of God the Father, of the person and work of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, of creation, of the Church, of evangelism/mission, of the last things. Every one of these must contribute to our understanding of being as well as spiritual, practical human

living. This is because “theology is meaningful only as it affects life and character.”<sup>1</sup>

To aid human living then a theology for Christian living must be a living Christian theology. A living Christian theology must be concerned with and relevant to being and life. It must also possess a biblical, Christian, spiritual, practical identity. It must be a responsive theology, responding responsibly to a particular human worldview of culture, philosophy, religion and time. It must be stated systematically, intellectually, coherently so that it can dialogue with other theologies. It must thus be open to critique, reformulation and growth.

Second, there is agreement among Christian biblical, historical and systematic theologians that the meaning and purpose of human life is to be found in his creation as the image of God. In spite of the fact that the male and female equally reflect the image of God, God is neither male nor female. God is above creation and human sexuality. However, since man is a complex being, it is difficult to state emphatically what the image of God in man means; there is a wide variety of interpretation of the concept. This problem becomes more pronounced when theological anthropology attempts a dialogue with other anthropological disciplines.

Macquarrie thus commented: “in modern times we seem to be as far as ever from an agreed understanding of what man is or who we are, and the great conflicting ideologies of our time reflect different understandings of what constitutes a genuinely human existence”.<sup>2</sup> With regard to the constituent nature, the dissertation concluded that man should be seen as a “di-unity”. Of all the various explanations this work benefited the most from the concept of

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Stagg., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*. 1971 ed., Vol. II, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 59.

the image of God as a quality that enables him to relate to God, to self, to the world and to fellow men.

*Third*, traditional theologies of human existence in church history are of little, indeed very limited, value for total contemporary African human situation for at least two reasons. In the first place, they are limited to the study of man in relation to God. They did not discuss man in relation to other men. In any case, even if they had done so, they could not have been relevant to the contemporary African context since they did not develop their theologies to address the contemporary African situation.

*Fourth*, the African understanding of man as a relational being is very helpful to formulate a theology of man as a social, communal being. It is pathetic however to observe that that rich understanding of human existence and corresponding communal values and life are being threatened and destroyed by modern lifestyle. The appearance of individualism and loss of African community and humanity need to be quickly and fully rediscovered, embraced and preserved for posterity. The recommendations will now be presented.

### **C. Recommendations**

Throughout the length and breadth of the essay a number of limitations were pointed out. Some of these limitations are eye openers for areas of further scholarly studies. Some other hints were provided in the study.

John Parratt once said, "All true theology, however, must lay itself open to critique."<sup>3</sup> He made this point in *Reinventing Christianity* when he tried "to subject African theology to critical analysis in the hope that this may lead to a

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<sup>3</sup> Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 3.

refinement that will be of benefit to the church worldwide.”<sup>4</sup> This researcher is pleased to humbly lay this work open to critique and improvement. The work cannot but reflect author is limited eight years of formal theological studies. Readers, especially those who are better exposed to the study of African Christian theology, would be greatly appreciated to point to the writer ideas in the dissertation that can be improved, strengthened and built upon. Altogether seven recommendations will be made.

First, there is the need for a more intensive theological investigation of the doctrine of double predestination as seen in the theologies of Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin. It is a perennial and compelling issue and the study has the potentials of being a rewarding exercise.

Second, the study presented some myths of creation, alienation, death and redemption in African Traditional Religion with a greater concentration in East Africa. More work need to be done in other parts of Africa to know if there are more myths of redemption in traditional African culture. The exemplary and commendable work of Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz<sup>5</sup> may lead other scholars to discover some other myths that may be of help to Christian mission in the African context.

Third, a study of the African worldview of man was carried out from African culture, philosophy and religion. Certainly it would be interesting and it may turn out to be equally revealing and educative to do a thorough enquiry of the theology of African independent, indigenous churches on this and other

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<sup>4</sup> Parrat.

<sup>5</sup> Heraley K. and Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, p. 64-67, 206-207

Christian doctrines. This “is one of the urgent tasks facing African theologians today.”<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, the research focused on the beginning of the relationship between God and man at creation. Distinct African Christian theologies of sin and salvation can be formulated from a study of how the relationship was broken and then restored respectively. No one single work of this nature can deal with everything considered important, urgent and relevant. One major area left out is the relationship of man with time. The African concept of time is an equally important part of African humanity.

Fifth Christology is a lively and interesting contemporary theological study. There are ideas in this work that can be further investigated to provoke and enrich African Christological studies: A communal Christology can be developed from the theme of Christ at the hearer of the image of God; A functional Christology can be formulated around the idea of Christ as the Source of existence/life.

Sixth, the work could only highlight certain issues and implications of globalization on Africa’s social, cultural, economic and political life. Ideas from the communal values stated can be used for a more detailed construction of African Christian theology of social life.

Seventh and finally, after many years of theological domination and imperialism by Euro-American scholars, the time has come for African Christians to theologise effectively, adequately, and relevantly. The time has come for more African Christian theologies to be developed on more specific subjects: God, Holy Spirit, revelation, Satan, creation. The time has come for

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<sup>6</sup> Parrat, *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 7.



us to rise with courage and use the resources at our disposal to fulfil the theological task of the African Church. The time has come to put into practice the admonition of John S. Mbiti an eminent theologian of African soil: We have to continue with the task of theologizing, irrespective of what may be done to muffle our efforts. We have all the tools and sources necessary for the fulfillment of this task."<sup>7</sup> If this theological treatise is a positive and meaningful contribution, however little, to aid a more authentic African human existence, then, to God be the glory.