

PARADIGM SHIF IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN AND CENTRAL AFRICA AND ITS RELEVANCE TO MINISTERIAL FORMATION

By

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the changes that are taking place in theological education in Africa since 1980s as a result of challenges that the African people face today. It is argued in the paper that traditional theology, which dominated the colonial period and immediately after independence is not adequate to address the various social, religious, social, economic and political problems and challenges prevalent in the African continent. In order to address these problems and challenges, new theologies are being developed, which are relevant to the African reality on the ground. The paper begins by giving a historical account of the origin and expansion of the church in Africa from the 19th century to the present day and the role that theological education has played in the area of evangelism. Having discussed the nature of the curriculum of traditional theology and its failure to address the African question, the paper goes on to discuss the various theologies that are currently taking shape in Africa, which seem to be relevant in the African situation.

2. The planting of Christianity in Africa

Christianity is one of the most vibrant and dynamic World Religions in Africa. Its impact is felt practically everywhere on the African continent. Although the beginning of Christianity in Africa is traced back to the apostolic times, long before it was established in Europe and America; it was only in the 19th century that real missionary work in Sub-Saharan African began to take root, which led to the planting of Christian churches in many parts of Africa. Alec R. Vidler in his book *The Church in an age of revolution* has postulated that for the churches of the West the nineteenth century was a period of unprecedented expansion.¹ During this period both Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries planted churches in many countries in Africa. The expansion was of such proportion that the 19th century has been considered the greatest century since the first.² Since then the expansion of the Church in Africa has continued unabated.

Elizabeth Isichei in her book entitled *A history of Christianity in Africa* has intimated that according to some statistics there were 10 million African Christians in 1900, 143 million in 1970 and predicted that there would be 393 million in the year 2,000 which means that 1 in 5 of all Christians would be an African³ Christianity in Africa is no longer a small

¹ A. Vidler, *The Church in an age of revolution*, London: Penguin Books, 1961, p. 246.

² Vidler, *The Church*...p. 246.

³ E. Isichei, *A history of Christianity in Africa*, London: SPCK, 1995, p.1.

tributary of the vast seas of the churches in Europe but a fully-fledged church come of age. While the membership of individual churches may be limited to a few hundreds or thousands or millions of Christians, the cumulative impact of the membership of all the Christian churches put together is tremendous making Africa, perhaps, the most Christianised continent in the world. Recent statistics, though possibly not completely reliable, show that in many Sub-Saharan African countries, Christians are in the majority. This is the case in Uganda (83.4%), Kenya (82.1%), Central African Republic (83%), Cameroon (62.2%), Equatorial Guinea (93%), Rwanda (80%), Democratic Republic of Congo (95.9%), Republic of Congo (85.4%), Gabon (87.1%), Ghana (64%), South Africa (72%), Lesotho (93%), Swaziland (80%), Zambia (75%), Zimbabwe (61.7%), Malawi (81.1%), Angola (84%), Namibia (91%) and Botswana (62%).⁴ These figures are not only very impressive but also show the tremendous commitment that Africans have to the Gospel of Christ. They also show that the future of Christianity is in Africa judging by the way in which people young and old amass themselves in their respective churches day after day and Sunday after Sunday.

3. The importance of Theological Education in Africa

Theological education in Africa is as old as the Church itself. On the basis of the tenets of the Great Commission, as stipulated in Matthew 28:18-20, Christian churches have, since their inception, introduced formal education in the form of Christian schools and theological colleges. Theological colleges have become the backbone of Christian evangelism throughout Africa. The importance of theological education in Southern and Central Africa is seen by the fact that there are numerous Bible schools, theological colleges and institutions of theological education by extension across the region many of which were established in the 1980s. In order to meet the needs for well-trained ministers different church denominations namely, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed and others have established theological institutions across Southern and Central Africa. Some universities too have established departments of theology and religious studies, which cater specifically for theological and religious education. Some of the students, who have graduated in such institutions, serve as full time or part-time ministers in their churches. This is the case in Malawi, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho and South Africa.

Because of its importance, theological education in Africa has, since 1920s become a matter of ecumenical concern. The need for well-trained church ministers necessitated the ecumenical cooperation of the churches in a particular country or region. In this regard, the post-war period witnessed the first attempts in joint theological training. In recent years ecumenical efforts in theological education in Africa, led to the establishment of ecumenical lay training centres and theological colleges such as Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation in Zambia, Chilema Lay Training Centre in Malawi; The Union Theological Seminary at Ricatla in Mozambique; the Epworth Theological College in Harare, Zimbabwe; the United College of Education in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe; Zomba Theological College in Malawi; Federal Theological Seminary in South Africa and others.⁵ Many of the theological

⁴ J. Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa*, Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1996, pp.253-281.

⁵ See J. N. Amanze, *A history of the ecumenical movement in Africa*, Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999, p.202.

institutions enumerated above offer theological training to Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians and others. This has been followed by the creation of Associations of Theological Institutions in much of Africa whose objective is to come up with relevant theology for the African churches. Today, though many churches in Africa place a great deal of emphasis on theological training of their ministers and lay leaders, many of them lack the financial resources that can enable them to provide adequate theological training. At any rate, the African Church has taken theological education seriously. Its emphasis is not only to train church ministers who can preach and evangelise but also to produce quality church ministers who can easily and quickly respond to modern day issues affecting the African Church and society.

4. Weaknesses inherent in theological education during the colonial period and after

It should be noted that theological education during the colonial period as well the period immediately after independence was riddled with many weaknesses some of which had a serious negative impact on the church. For the purpose of this paper we shall cite here a few examples relevant to our discussion. In the first instance, during the colonial period and immediately after independence the Church was too patriarchal a legacy that it has failed to shake off even today. The theology of its ministry was male dominated. Male missionaries dominated the missionary field at the expense of female missionaries whose presence was quite often overshadowed by men. Church ministry was based on the concept of male priesthood. God is perceived as male and, as a matter of fact, Christ was a man and not a woman and Christ's disciples were all male. This was taken as God-given and unchangeable in practically all the mainline churches as if it were by divine decree from the time of creation! It is true that many missionaries were accompanied by their wives and other women missionaries as doctors, nurses and teachers, their presence, however, was hardly registered and not at par with that of male missionaries. From a theological perspective, right from the time of the Old Testament, priesthood in the church has been patterned to that of Aaron and Christ thereby ruling out the possibility of women becoming priests. Theological training was, therefore, modelled along male lines. Men have, by and large, occupied positions of power in the Church. Women have, quite often, been relegated to duties that are assigned to women in the home. This approach excluded women from ministering fully to the Lord and made them passive spectators and not active participants. This undermined the growth of the Church in Africa.

Apart from this, up until the time of independence, the African church was characterised by an uncompromising stand against African culture, which was considered evil and anti-Christian. The attitude of the Christian missionaries in Africa towards African culture was practically the same everywhere and among missionaries of different denominations namely, Roman Catholic, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, Methodists, Lutherans, Moravians and others. Christian missionaries advocated complete eradication of African culture. African converts were told not to venerate their ancestral spirits, engage themselves in raincalling ceremonies in times of drought, offer libations to God through the ancestors, not to use traditional medicines, not to observe agricultural rituals, not to participate in initiation ceremonies and other cultural practices. They were

asked to break up with the past and embrace European or American culture wholesale. Failure to abide to the new rules, quite often, resulted in church discipline in the form of suspension or excommunication. This negative approach to African culture alienated many African people. Many African traditionalists resisted from embracing Christianity while others broke away from the mainline churches and formed their own churches, which have come to be known as African Independent Churches. In such churches people believe and practice their Christianity in African ways.

It should also be noted that during the colonial period and immediately after independence theological training for church ministry was along traditional lines. The curriculum was dominated by Biblical studies with emphasis on the literature of the Old and New Testament, Biblical theology and Biblical interpretation. Apart from Biblical studies a great deal of emphasis was placed on church doctrines covering much of the patristic period, scholastic theology, theology of the Reformation, history of Christian mission, sacramental theology, the planting of the churches in Africa, homiletics, Christian ethics, pastoral studies, the liturgy and in some instances other world religions such as Islam. Little attention, if any, was paid to cultural studies, gender, the environment, socio-economic development, democratisation and the like. The church ministers that were produced at this period were a carbon copy of the priests from the mother churches from top to bottom. Essentially, theological education was an exact replica of the curriculum, which was dominant in the mother churches overseas. The result was that much of the theology produced at this period was divorced from the aspirations and realities of the African life. Such a theology was irrelevant. Vidler has drawn a very interesting caricature of the church ministers that emerged out of the colonial period. He writes:

“The missionaries had no doubt about the complete superiority of their own culture, and therefore, their method was to transplant all they could of Christianity in its western forms. Hence churches and chapels were built in Africa....in the neo-Gothic architectural styles that were then fashionable in Europe. Native priests were dressed up like European clergymen, and even native bishops, when there came to be such, adorned themselves in the riding attire of eighteenth century prelates which has sometimes been mistaken for that of a highlander going to a funeral! European music, art, and ways of living were blindly exported.”⁶

Because of the missionaries' emphasis on European and American oriented theology, theological institutions during the colonial period and immediately after ended up producing Eurocentric theology which was out of touch with the African reality and, therefore, irrelevant and detrimental to the nascent Christian Church in Africa. It is only at the beginning of the 1970s that it became crystal clear to many churches that in order to make a lasting impact in Africa the Church needed to change course in its theological programs by taking into account seriously political, economic, social and religious changes in Africa. Such a move would produce a relevant theology for the African Church.

⁶ Vidler, *The Church*.....p.252.

5. A paradigm shift in Theological education in Southern and Central Africa

The church in Africa faces different challenges, which require different theological answers. Traditional theology, that has dominated the Church since the colonial period, has proved inadequate in addressing the political, cultural, social, religious and economic issues facing the African people today. This has, consequently, necessitated a different methodological approach in theological education. The pressing issues that affect Africa today include, among other things, (1) the need to take African culture seriously (2) the demand made by women in church and society for equal opportunities in the ministry of the Church (3) the need for the Church to play an active role in the fight against HIV and AIDS, (4) the need to fight against global warming and depletion of natural resources (5), the need to develop a theology of liberation for those who are oppressed and (6) the need for the churches to engage in socio-economic development .

(a) Towards an indigenous Christian theology for independent Africa

Augustine C. Musopole in his paper titled “Needed: A theology cooked in an African pot” has noted that immediately after independence in Africa, the African church inherited traditional denominational theologies, which were cooked in western pots and, therefore, has had a western texture and taste. These theologies, which are essentially theological relics with little to do with the realities of Africa today, underlie the ecclesiastical practices of the churches in Africa. One major difficulty of these inherited theologies is that they have been advocating practices that would be hard to justify theologically. In most cases the theologies that have been taught in theological institutions have been hard to apply thereby making them irrelevant. It is in this context that theologians have been increasingly aware that there is a need to develop a home-grown theology though it has sometime been criticised as neo-pagan.⁷ This awareness has encouraged theologians to develop what has come to be known variously as incarnational theology, African Christian Theology, inculturation theology and, better still, contextual theology. The idea is that the Church needs to become African in belief, theology and practice for it to be truly African. According to Musopole, since theology arises out of evangelism and evangelism is about the incarnate Christ, theology must then take an incarnational nature. It must focus on the cultural context of both the students and the people they are going to evangelise. The need to develop an incarnational theology is evident in many theological institutions in Southern and Central Africa. For example, one of the projects of the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa since its inception in 1986 (ATISCA) has been to develop contextual theology. The need to develop a contextual theology for Africa generally and Southern and Central Africa in particular dominated the discussions of the ATISCA conference held in Swaziland in 1996, the proceedings of which have been published in book form titled *Theology cooked in an African pot*. This was followed by another ATISCA conference in

⁷ Augustine C. Musopole, “Needed: A theology cooked in an African pot” in K. Fiedler et. al. (eds.), *Theology cooked in an African pot*” (Special ATISCA Bulletin No.5/6) Limbe: Malawi Assemblies of God Press, 1998, pp. 7-11.

Mozambique in 1999 whose objective was to promote theology in the vernacular in order to make it more relevant to the African people in the region.⁸

(b) Globalisation and theological education

It should be noted that at the same time as theological educators strive to develop indigenous Christian theologies, they are also aware that this cannot be done in isolation. They must take into account the issue of globalisation. There is a growing awareness in theological circles that we live today in an era of global communications, Internet, information superhighways and intercontinental travel to the extent that the world is conceived as a “global village”. The concept of the global village has brought along a model and doctrine of globalisation, which is a form of rationalisation for the ideology of the freedom of the financial markets across the world. This has given transnational corporations the right to conduct their business without restrictions of border boundaries, political, social and geographical.⁹ From a theological perspective globalisation has proved to be a serious challenge to Africa generally and to Southern and Central Africa in particular as attested by the recent events in the Anglican Communion concerning the issue of homosexuality. A local dispute in the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire in the USA concerning the consecration of a gay Bishop has now assumed a cosmic proportion affecting the Anglican Church world-wide. As a result of swift internet communications, the issue of homosexuality has now assumed its own course and in the context of Africa it is being propelled on the wings of poverty. The present economic situation, which continues to produce unjustifiable levels of concentration of economic power and serious disparities between the rich churches in America and the poor churches in Africa, puts the African church in a begging position. This means that African Christians are easily manipulated by their affluent brothers and sisters in the Northern Hemisphere, as they compete for support for their cause whatever their position. It seems to me that lack of adequate theological training on matters of human sexuality has made matters worse when it comes to the issue of same sex relations and people find it difficult to take a stand that may be helpful to everyone concerned.

(c) Towards feminist theology for the empowerment of women

It has been noted above that the Church in Africa is heavily patriarchal in belief, theology and practice. As the Churches moved into the 1980s they became increasingly aware of the injustices that have been perpetrated against women in God’s name by excluding them from the ordained ministry of the Church. The Church has also become aware of the important role that women play in church and society. Politically, women today assume positions of power and authority in many African countries. Some are presidents while others have assumed the positions of cabinet ministers, speakers of the House of Parliament, members of Parliament and the like. On the contrary, the churches have

⁸ The author was involved in the organisation of these conferences as Chairperson of ATISCA from 1994-1998.

⁹ Molefe Tsele, “ Current issues in Africa” in J. S. Pobee (ed.), *Africa moving towards the eighth assembly*, Harare: Canon Press, 1998, p.17.

lagged behind in promoting women affairs in the Church. Interestingly enough, the churches are now making deliberate efforts to encourage theological institutions to integrate in their curriculum gender studies designed to promote women issues.

Theological reflection on the position and role of women in church and society is now firmly entrenched in the curriculum of many university departments of theology and religious studies as well as theological colleges. The idea is to promote a theology of equality between men and women as people who have been created in the image and likeness of God. All forms of discrimination against women in church and society are rejected. Emphasis is placed on promoting equal participation of both men and women in the ministry of the Church in which women are not passive observers but active participants at all levels of the structures of the Church. Although the results on the ground are slow the message is sinking deep into the peoples' minds. It is obvious that in a church where the majority of people are women, there is a need for some of them to occupy positions of leadership, as they bring their people closer to God. In this context, the African Independent Churches have taken a lead by producing women church founders, bishops, prophets and healers. A number of theological institutions in many Protestant and Anglican churches in South Africa now include women in their theological programs, who eventually become pastors or priests in their churches on their own right. In order to produce relevant feminist theology for the empowerment of women in Southern and Central Africa, the issues of women became a major concern at the ATISCA conferences of 1997 and 1998 in Zimbabwe.¹⁰

(c) Towards a relevant theology to fight against HIV and AIDS

Since the beginning of the 1980s Africa has been in the grip of HIV and AIDS. By most accounts, Sub-Saharan Africa is the hardest hit by the epidemic in the world. Available statistics show that the epidemic may be spiralling out of control if necessary measures to stop its spread are not put in place firmly and decisively. From mid-1980s to the present day, the rate of the spread of the epidemic continues unabated with new cases being registered everyday. It is estimated that in Botswana, Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa the infection rate stands at an average of 30% and life expectancy has dropped drastically from 60 years to between 30 and 40 years. The epidemic has left behind millions of orphans, who have lost either both parents or one parent. Some of them are under the care of orphanages while others continue to be cared for by members of the extended family.¹¹

It is important to note that the AIDS pandemic, which is threatening the very survival of the African people has, in recent years, become a focus of theological reflection. In order to fight effectively against this scourge, churches have been called upon to integrate in their teaching, preaching, worship and pastoral care some knowledge of the dangers posed by HIV and AIDS. One of the greatest obstacles in the prevention and treatment of people living with HIV and AIDS is stigma. This is because stigma prevents people from going for voluntary testing and counselling and to declare their HIV

¹⁰ The author was instrumental in organizing these conferences as Chairperson of ATISCA.

¹¹ See J. N. Amanze et. al (eds.) *Christian ethics and HIV/AIDS in Africa*, Gaborone: Bay Publishing 2007 where the issue of HIV and AIDS in Africa has been discussed in detail by a number of authors from different African countries.

status. As a result, they pass on the virus to other people so that they should not die alone. Consequently, AIDS has become a silent killer with funeral processions taking place everyday to the point that many families have been impoverished because of funeral costs.

While at the beginning of the epidemic many churches were judgmental by moralising the epidemic as a punishment from God, today many churches are developing “theologies of hope”. Again many churches offer counselling services to people who have been infected and affected by the epidemic. Hospices have also been established to provide care for the terminally ill as part of the churches’ expression of love to the people of God who have been caught up in the epidemic. Young people are encouraged to abstain from sex and only engage in sexual relationships when they are married. This is done by means of seminars, workshops and conferences run by pastors and priests.

In order to have well informed and trained enablers, HIV and AIDS information is being integrated in the curriculum in theological colleges, seminaries and departments of theology and religious studies at a number of universities in the region. Students are taught how HIV is contracted, how it is spread, how it can be prevented and how one can take care of those who have been infected and affected by the AIDS pandemic. This has been possible through the offices of the World Council of Churches whose officers organise conferences, seminars and workshops for capacity building.

At the University of Botswana, for example, HIV and AIDS issues form an integral part of biblical studies, systematic theology, pastoral studies, ethics, ecumenical theology, philosophy, religious studies and others. Both members of staff and students are engaged in extensive and intensive research on HIV and AIDS under the *Tumelo* Project (faith based) and others whose results will be published in the form of reports and papers. The emphasis is on equipping theological students with the knowledge on how they can protect themselves and others from the virus. The issues of stigma are also dealt with in order to encourage students to go for voluntary testing and counselling. Attention is paid to the need not only to raise the awareness among the youth of the dangers brought about by the epidemic but also to raise their moral standards in order to live a life free of HIV and AIDS.¹²

(e) Towards a theology of liberation and democratisation

It is important to note that one of the issues that dominated the Southern African region in the 1970s and 1980s was the need to liberate South Africa from the throes of apartheid, which brought untold suffering and death to countless people. During the apartheid period, many people lost their birth right through land dispossession, racial segregation and discrimination in churches, public services, employment, education, and politics. Many black South Africans were turned foreigners in their own country. Throughout the apartheid period, a number of churches chose to be in solidarity with the poor and the downtrodden. It is a well-known fact that the emancipation of the African people was not only achieved by means of an armed struggle but also through the involvement of the churches locally and internationally. In order to conscientise the masses to fight effectively against the apartheid system, South African theologians derived some

¹² The syllabus of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana reflects clearly the integration of HIV/AIDS information in its various programs and courses.

inspiration from the teachings of Latin American Liberation Theology and North American Black Theology. Black Theology on the one hand places a great deal of emphasis on the notion that God in Christ is in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and that God empathises with the black people and their suffering in a system characterised by systematic racism and social injustice.¹³ Latin American Liberation Theology on the other hand places a great deal of emphasis on God's preferential love for the poor, salvation as holistic liberation and theology as an element in the practice of liberation rather than as a mere theory.¹⁴ These theologies equipped people with the ideological tools necessary to fight against their oppressors in the form of religious protests and open criticism of the apartheid system. A number of universities and theological institutions became a bastion of the new way of thinking.

The quest to produce a relevant theology for the emancipation of the people of South Africa culminated in the Kairos Document, which was issued by a group of South African Theologians in 1985. The statement challenged the churches to respond decisively to the vicious policies of Apartheid State under the state of emergency declared on 21st July 1985. The Kairos Document is claimed to be a prime example of contextual theology and liberation theology in South Africa.¹⁵ Both Liberation Theology and Black Theology equipped the masses to take a daring step of challenging the structures of the apartheid regime and demanding freedom from their colonial masters. Inspired and imbued by the sense of liberation and freedom theologians have, in the past thirty years, chosen to stand on the side of the poor, the powerless and the marginalised in the democratic processes in Namibia, Angola, Mozambique and Malawi. Again through what has come to be known as "Theology of Peace and Reconstruction" the churches are continuing to participate actively in the democratisation process in South Africa, Namibia, Malawi and other countries in the southern African region.

(e) Towards a theology for the preservation of the environment

The issues of global warming, the depletion of natural resources and the degradation of the environment have raised the need to integrate environmental issues in theological education. The idea behind all this is to ensure that natural resources are used at a rate that is balanced and sustainable for future generations. With this in mind deliberate efforts are being made to integrate in the curriculum environmental issues. From a theological perspective, in modern times, stewardship means more than administering church affairs but the whole of God's creation. Issues that are frequently debated in theological circles include, among others, global warming, the problems of overgrazing, the erosion of the soil due to poor agricultural practices that lead to wind and water damage to the land, the pollution of water, air and even the soil by human activities, deforestation, destruction of wildlife, and urban and rural pollution. In order to address this problem workshops and

¹³ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding: An introduction to Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 405.

¹⁴ Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding*.....p.415.

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kairos_Document,p.1.

conferences are being organized in order to conscientise ministerial candidates to be environmental conscious.¹⁶

(f) Towards a multi-faith theological curriculum

Southern and Central Africa is home to a number of World Religions namely African Traditional Religions, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism, Bahai and others. In the past theological education tended to emphasise the exclusive nature of Christianity at the expense of other faiths. This created a great deal of conflict between Christians and followers of other world religions. This is because the relationship between one religion and another is characterised by what may be called “truth-falsehood-relationship”. Divine truth is thought to be exclusively in one religion normally in the religion of those in the majority. Other religions are there to be conquered and eradicated on the assumption that they are false, therefore, idolatrous. This attitude seems to be changing now in much of Southern and Central Africa. As a result, there has been a move towards a multi-faith approach in theological education. People have become aware that the different religions that are prevalent in Africa today are there to stay. In order to forge a peaceful co-existence, efforts are being made to include in the theological curriculum elements that promote and enhance religious tolerance. Religious exclusivism is discouraged in favour of religious pluralism. In this regard, theological curriculum includes the study not only of Christianity but also of all other world religions. The syllabi normally cover the life of the founders of the different religions, their teachings, beliefs, rituals, practices, sacred places and symbols as laid out by each religion and how they relate to other religions. In the context of Botswana and in line with Vision 2016, theological institutions are making deliberate efforts to promote concepts in theological education that stress the values of a multi-cultural society. It is expected that such an approach will assist the nation to eradicate segregation based on gender, age, religion, colour, national or ethnic origin, language and political opinions. The Botswana government has made a strong appeal to theological institutions and churches to participate actively in the fight against discrimination and promote values that lead towards the eradication of negative social attitudes towards the status and role of women, the youth, the elderly, and the disabled and strive for a society free from any form of harassment.¹⁷

(i) Towards a theology of development

In recent years theological education has also taken into account seriously issues of socio-economic development. Molefe Tsele in his paper “current issues in Africa” has pointed out that “after more than three decades of the world embarking on development in Africa, the situation today is ironically worse off than three decades ago.”¹⁸ According to Tsele, Africa is poorer and more in debt today than the development era of 1960s.

¹⁶ This has, since 1990s, become a major concern of the departments of theology and religious studies at the universities of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland (BOLOSWA).

¹⁷ *Vision 2016 Towards Prosperity For All*, Presidential Task Group for a long term vision for Botswana, Gaborone: 1997.

¹⁸ Tsele, “Current issues in Africa”.....p.15.

Poverty in Africa is both real and relative. It is deeply rooted in the colonial history of Africa. It is common knowledge that many African countries were plundered of their natural resources during the colonial period and are being plundered today by their own rulers. Apart from this problem, a number of African countries suffer natural disasters such as drought, famine, land dispossession, civil unrest and many others. Poverty and economic inequality in Africa are such that they require effort from many angles and at all levels. In view of the bad performance of African countries to realise a sustainable socio-economic growth and development it has become incumbent upon the churches to advocate and insist that development is authentic where it uplifts and equips communities with skills to deal with their own situation. In order to achieve this goal theological education is development oriented. Theological students are taught to be catalysts of change in the community. In the context of the University of Botswana, where we also have students who eventually become ministers of the church, we teach students to be job creators and not job seekers. They are encouraged to empower their communities by engaging themselves in development work. In other words, it is realised that socio-economic development entails the empowerment of people at the grassroots level. Church ministers are taught not to work for the people but with the people in their fight against poverty and human degradation. At the University of Botswana, for instance, our courses are designed to equip students with the skills that they need to help people to improve their economic stay in their every day life situation. To this effect, workshops, seminars and conferences are organised in order to conscientise both the community and students to engage themselves in developmental projects. The importance of socio-economic development in Southern and Central Africa is seen by the fact that the theme of the ATISCA Conference, which was held in Zomba, Malawi in 1993 and attended by a large number of theological students was “The Role of Christianity in Development, Peace and Reconstruction”.¹⁹

(h) Towards a theology of prosperity

Finally this paper would be incomplete without making reference to a new trend in theological discourse in Southern and Central Africa, which is catching the imagination of many people and is drawing thousands of people into the new faith. It has come to be known as “theology of prosperity”. This theology stands in sharp contrast with the traditional theology taught in mainline churches with its emphasis on the virtues of poverty as displayed in the earthly life of Jesus. The theology of prosperity advocates that faith can produce great miracles and wonders. It can bestow upon the individual not only a variety of spiritual gifts such as healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy and the like but also material prosperity in this world. One way of achieving this prosperity is to give generously to the church so that God can open the windows of heaven and bestow upon the cheerful giver all the material blessings that he or she desires (see 2 Cor. 9:7-9). Those who preach the gospel of prosperity teach that giving is a gateway to receiving material blessings from God in the form of cash through one’s bank account, which increases miraculously by divine intervention. The more one gives the more one gets and the less one gives the less one gets or does not get at all!

¹⁹ I actively participated at this meeting. The papers presented focused on the issue of development in Southern and Central Africa.

The theology of prosperity is taught and propagated mainly by a new wave of new Religious Movements commonly known as “New Generation Churches”. Some of them are self-styled and work independently while others operate as syndicates. In the context of Botswana, a good example of the “gospel of prosperity” type of churches is Christ Embassy”. Their theologies are constructed on the basis of human tragedy such as disease, poverty, anxiety, and frustrations caused by a breakdown in human relationships such as marriage. As a result, many people throng to the new ministries and some times give beyond their means to the point of being impoverished in the hope that one day they will be economically better off. The new ministries teach people to reject the virtues of poverty and strive to be prosperous not by means of working hard in one’s enterprise but through faith in Christ as demonstrated in self-less giving of all that one has. Though many critics say that the new ministries are robbing the poor of their hard earned cash, many people have decided to render a deaf ear to such comments and continue to flock to the new ministries with the hope of being rich materially one day.²⁰

6. Conclusion

In this paper it has been argued that there are tremendous differences in the way in which theological discourse is conducted today and how it was conducted during the colonial period and immediately after independence. The paper gave a brief account of the planting of the Church in Africa and its tremendous growth over the years. It has been argued in the paper that theological education contributed tremendously to the growth and expansion of the church in Africa. However, theological education during the colonial period was both anti-culture and anti-women. This is because it was patriarchal in belief, theology and practice. This impacted negatively in the development of the Church. Again, theological education was not development oriented and virtues of poverty were emphasised. The paper has gone on to indicate that because of modern challenges in Africa as a result of the demand for equality between men and women in the need for democratisation, the threat posed by the HIV and AIDS pandemic to name but a few have forced theological educators to change course. This is manifested in the emergence of new theologies intended to address the challenges faced by the African people today a trend, which appears to be here to stay.

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²⁰ Currently this is a matter of heated and interesting debate. The New Generation Churches” whose main emphasis is on evangelism in accordance with the Great Commission as stipulated in Mt. 28: 18-20.

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