Lutheranism in Africa

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I. THE CHURCH AND THE PRESENT CRISIS

The churches in Africa, including the Lutheran churches, have been growing very rapidly over the years. It is projected that if this growth rate continues, Africa will soon have the largest number of Christians in the world.¹ There are today more than six million Lutherans in Africa, the largest concentration being in Tanzania, Madagascar, Namibia, South Africa, and Ethiopia. There is, however, a Lutheran presence in most of the countries south of the Sahara.

The church in Africa carries out its God-given mission under very difficult circumstances. Africa is currently faced with enormous socio-economic and political problems. The majority of its people are becoming poorer and poorer in the face of many declining economies. Ecological problems and unpredictable weather patterns have contributed to drought, hunger, and starvation. Oppressive regimes, civil wars, and other internal conflicts—often fueled by external interest groups who supply arms or even troops to one of the sides—have produced an unprecedented number of displaced and homeless persons who become burdens not only to their countries of asylum but also to the international community as a whole. The widespread suppression of freedom of speech and other human rights abuses all add to hardships that pose formidable challenges to the people and the churches of Africa as a whole. Apartheid is still alive in South Africa, and the rest of Africa, far from being economically independent, is instead becoming more and more heavily indebted to the rich countries of the north. After many years under colonial rule, its effects are still being felt as African peoples everywhere search for their own identity and their own social and economic systems.

The church in Africa is inseparably bound to this situation, and by the nature

Budapest in 1984, before they would seriously begin to dialogue with the black Lutheran churches in South Africa. In Zimbabwe, President Robert G. Mugabe made the following observations shortly after independence:

Christianity for years acquiesced in the politics of successive regimes, contrary to its morality, impoverished the majority in favor of the minority, although in fulfillment of its religious role it built churches for the evangelization of those it saw being impoverished by capitalism, schools for the limited education for some of their children, and hospitals for their limited health care. The church then dared not stand in opposition to the state and condemn its inhumanity to the black majority population until the most violent and final phase of colonialism was reached when it became jolted by two factors, the bitter criticism it received from African nationalism, and secondly, the revulsion it felt to the illegal and oppressive political order created by the unilateral declaration of independence in 1965.3

President Mugabe’s remarks are supported by Zvobgo’s research into church and state relations in colonial Zimbabwe, which demonstrated that even where missionary representatives of the church criticized the colonial regime on the question of the franchise, their thinking remained within the colonialist frame of mind, demanding that the white representatives of the “natives” in parliament be elected by the “natives” themselves.4

Within the Lutheran churches in southern Africa, individual Christians and pastors have been speaking out, and indeed some of them—the case of Dean Farisani being a good example—have had to suffer detention, imprisonment, and torture for their public stances against injustice. But, as African and African-American theologians observed after the Harare conference in 1986, Lutherans in general “have not been in the forefront of human struggles for sociopolitical and economic liberation.”5 One hears very little or nothing at all from official church agencies when compared with, for example, the very outspoken Catholic Justice and Peace Commission in Zimbabwe, which has championed the cause of human rights in Zimbabwe from the period of colonialism right up to the present. Does this silence have something to do with a misinterpretation of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms or the failure of Lutheranism to link justification with justice?6 Therefore, the question: Whither Lutheranism in Africa today? becomes appropriate and relevant at this stage in African history. The basic questions are: What

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is the role of the church in Africa today? Is Lutheranism of any relevance in Africa? How can the Lutheran heritage be relevant in the Africa of today? The question asked by the Lutheran theologians at Harare in 1986: “Is Lutheranism large enough to house more than one cultural tradition?” is just as valid today as it was then. Is Lutheranism capable of responding in its theology and praxis to the needs and aspirations of the people of Africa?

The arrival of Lutheran missionaries in Africa during the eighteenth century coincided with the colonization of the continent by major European powers. Today, as already observed above, there is a Lutheran presence in almost all countries south of the Sahara. One of the major outcomes of the conference of African and African-American theologians and church leaders was the affirmation of the validity of the Lutheran tradition for the black churches in Africa and America. The African experience demands that we see the two kingdoms doctrine not as an affirmation of the separation of church and state, but of the overall sovereignty of God. It empowers the church as the custodian of God’s will to demand justice from the state if it is to remain God’s instrument of peace. The two kingdoms doctrine means, in the first place, a recognition of the fact that God uses social and political structures as a means of achieving God’s objectives. It is the duty of the state to conform to God’s will, since God is involved in the whole creation, establishing order where there is disorder, bringing life where there is death, and working through the church as well as through the state in order to enable the entire creation to give glory to God. The doctrine does not divide the world into the “sacred” and the “profane,” but claims all of it for God and empowers both the church and the state to strive for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

Such an understanding is more appealing to African traditional background with its holistic approach to life. Where there is injustice it is the duty of the church to carry out a prophetic witness. This prophetic aspect of two kingdoms doctrine, as I see it, needs to be reaffirmed, even with all the risks involved, if the Lutheran church is to play a meaningful role in Africa. The church in Africa must seriously address the internal conflicts, and its leadership must itself be above reproach in dealing with its membership, especially when that membership includes persons from different ethnic origins. As it is, churches have often sided with the ruling majority, resulting in tensions within the churches themselves, as is currently the case within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe.

II. LUTHERANISM AND AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY

Africa is a very large continent made up of different peoples with differing and sometimes even conflicting backgrounds. That the differences often occur even within the same nation occasions the internal conflicts referred to above. The question then is: How can Lutheranism accommodate the many cultural groups and still remain faithful to its tradition?
this regard it is important to recall the principle inherited from Martin Luther that the Christian faith requires interpretation in a way that is meaningful for each people. Luther’s translation of the Bible into German affirmed the need to translate the gospel message into different cultures, and the use of other cultural instruments to interpret the gospel. That every people is entitled to hear God speak in their own language is an affirmation of the validity of images and symbols from every culture for the worship of God and for theological discourse. The Reformation liberated the gospel from its Roman captivity and allowed it to be rooted in other cultures.

Lutheranism, however, like all other European- and American-based denominations, made no attempt to translate the gospel into African cultures. Those cultures were either totally ignored or despised in the belief that the peoples of Africa had no meaningful religious experience before contacts with Christianity or Islam. Africans were thus deprived of the joy of hearing the gospel and worshiping God through images and symbols that were meaningful to them. Studies have now made it abundantly clear that the indigenous peoples of Africa had their own viable cultural and religious expressions, which could have served as powerful instruments to communicate the gospel right from the beginning. Their traditional religious experiences have left marks on African Christian spirituality and have given to African Christianity, even within the Lutheran tradition, an identity of its own. In order to be viable and meaningful, Lutheranism in Africa will have to look at several areas and relate these to African cultural expressions. The following comments highlight a few areas for concern if Lutheran spirituality is to take a firm hold in Africa.

First, in the area of worship, European hymns and liturgies were simply translated into the local languages and continue to be used to this day in most African churches. Greater emphasis should now be placed on new locally produced music. Some African churches have made significant progress along these lines. However, in some churches, for example in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe, this new style of music and choruses is hardly ever used during the formal worship service. But whenever it is sung, usually after the service or on other special occasions, there is always a noticeable difference as people move and dance their faith in a way that shows they are at home in the traditional forms of worship.

This is reflected in the Church Council and Church Assembly minutes of the last three to four years. Several abortive meetings have resulted from the well-documented conflict between the church leadership supported by the Eastern Deanery and the leadership and people of the Western Deanery.


Lutheranism in Africa must work to incorporate within the main worship service the African rhythm and dance, a task which appears to have been done successfully in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.

Second, theological reflection in Africa must begin by recognizing that belief in God was not new to Africa. Most of the African peoples south of the Sahara have always believed in a Supreme Being, who is the creator and the sustainer of the universe, and whose worship is mediated through ancestor spirits (*vadzimu* in Shona), who are defined by Mbiti as the “living dead.” Some early missionaries and anthropologists concluded that African peoples worshiped ancestors. What they failed to recognize, however, was that God was believed to be the first
ancestor and was even called the Great Ancestor (*Mudzimu Mukuru*) among the Shona peoples of Zimbabwe. In a traditional Shona cultic setting—as is true for most of the peoples south of the Sahara—petitions would be directed to the ancestors whose names were still remembered. Such petitions would conclude by requesting the last ancestor still remembered by name to ensure that all the others, now no longer remembered by their names, would be informed by each one of those ancestors in succession. The last in the line of ancestors is then requested to inform the creator ancestor, namely, the *mudzimu mukuru*. Communication with the ancestors thus meant communication with the Supreme Being.

Linking Christ with God makes Christ, in the eyes of the traditionalists, an ancestor, and in that way belief in ancestral spirits has continued within African Christian spirituality. Ancestral spirits are believed to be guardians of their living descendants. It is, therefore, not surprising when, in the thinking of many African Christians, ancestral spirits are identified with angels and/or saints in the Judeo-Christian traditions. I have argued elsewhere that, within Lutheran spirituality as received from Europe, the deceased saints can actually be described as the “living dead.” This is clearly attested in some Lutheran communion liturgies in which the reference to “the saints and all the company of heaven” is popularly understood to refer to the departed saints and the angels. Article 21 of the Augsburg Confession rejects any form of invocation of the Saints, but Lutheran spirituality has a place for them. Lutheranism in Africa needs to find a place for the ancestors in its spirituality, otherwise many will continue to invoke their ancestors secretly.

Third, Lutheranism as received from Europe places a great deal of emphasis on individual conversion as a means to attain salvation. African peoples, however, understand existence as being part of a community made up of the living and the “living dead.” Religion is not a matter for the individual but for the community as a whole, a community that is essentially religious, since religion permeates all aspects of life. There is, therefore, within African cultures a strong sense of belonging. Hence an individual’s action may bring divine wrath and punishment upon the entire community, and such punishment for misconduct is meted out in this world and not in the world to come. Either the whole community is saved or perishes. In traditional thought, belief in or knowledge of the ancestors’ spirits and the Supreme Being is based not on theory but on the community’s practical or concrete experience. In other words, for traditional Africa, faith and works, justification and justice, justification and sanctification, are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The “living dead,” who are members of the community, demand justice, good works, and proper relations within the community, and every member of the community has a moral and ethical obligation to ensure absolute obedience. Since relationships determine the future, where relationships are strained steps toward reconciliation must be taken immediately.
Lutheranism in Africa can, in this respect, be enriched by traditional African spirituality, particularly in its understanding of the church. The implications of koinonia are already embedded in the African understanding of living within the community in which everyone enjoys communion with one another. Although the Christian community is a much broader one, the concept of relations in the family or tribe can enhance Christian koinonia, in which the living saints and the departed ones are believed to join together in the same unending hymn of praise to the holy and almighty God expressed in the Holy Communion liturgies of some Lutheran churches.  

Another very important aspect relating to the encounter with African culture or spirituality is that Christianity in Africa, Lutheranism included, must take seriously the African traditional world view. As noted earlier, African peoples are holistic in their approach to life. The profane and the sacred cannot be distinguished from each other; the word “religion” is even absent from most African languages. This fact has an important impact on the development of African Christian theologies. African people are not given to speculation about life, hence the emphasis on living as praxis rather than on systematic theological reflection. There is more of a drive in Africa towards worship, which is seen as the totality of human action always in relationship to the spirit world.

This orientation towards praxis ought to initiate and inform all theological reflection in Africa. Where such serious theological reflection has been done—at present this has been mostly in situations of struggle such as in South Africa—the praxis orientation of African thinking has made the African theologian especially at home in the approach used by liberation theology in Latin America. The situation in South Africa has demanded a different theology from the one produced in the South African parliament in defense of apartheid, one that begins with the reality of the black experience in South Africa. The African traditional world view is therefore a challenge to Lutheranism, and Christianity as a whole, to adopt a more holistic and biblical approach in its life and ministry.

Finally, Lutheranism in Africa must open itself up for dialogue with other world religions such as Islam that have made their way into Africa. The Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches have both been involved in dialogue with people of other faiths. Lutheranism in Africa can learn from the approach of Moslems to African culture by not assuming all responsibility itself for judging cultures, and rather allowing the Spirit of God to help it discern where and how God is speaking through traditional cultures. Islam’s emphasis on the “brotherhood” of all human beings and on worship of the one supreme God alone, as well as its adoption of some African practices such as polygamy, has made many Africans feel at home within it. In other words, Islam takes African culture seriously in developing its African spirituality. This essay insists, as many others have done before, that for the church in Africa to have an impact it will have to take African culture seriously, present itself in such a way that it is felt as a real challenge, and thus allow for an African identity within Christendom. Lutheranism, like any other Christian church, is big enough to house people of different cultural backgrounds and to accommodate different forms of Christian spirituality. This means that dialogue with Africans of other faiths, such as with

\[15\text{See further discussion of this in my essay “Time for an African Lutheran Theology,” 76-96.}\]
Moslems, may in the end be very enriching to Christianity in Africa.

III. WHAT SHAPE FOR MINISTRY?

This discussion would be incomplete without dealing with the question of the Christian ministry and how it is perceived and carried out within the African context with all its conflicts and contradictions. It is necessary for the church to review its ministry in the light of its traditions and the specific situations it faces, and thus develop an effective and affordable form of the Christian ministry. Very basic to Lutheranism is the concept of the priesthood of all believers. However, a distinction is made between the general priesthood of all people of God and the ordained ministry. The latter ministry of Word and sacraments, according to Lutheran doctrine, can only be exercised by those who have received a special call from God.

Throughout the years most Lutheran churches in Africa have never had an adequate supply of pastors. In Zimbabwe, for example, pastors are commonly assigned to anywhere from ten to twenty congregations per person. In Harare alone, a city with a population of almost one million, there is at present one full time Lutheran pastor who has responsibility for over thirteen congregations. The situation is not very different in most of the Lutheran churches in Africa. One of the major reasons for the low numbers of salaried pastors is financial. The vast majority of church members are the poor who have difficulties supporting even themselves. Yet the church is growing rapidly because it has taken seriously the priesthood of all believers. Lay preachers and catechists play a very significant role in the preaching and teaching ministry of the church.

Because the ministry of Word and Sacrament is so central to the ministry of the church, it is crucial that the Lutheran churches in Africa reflect seriously on whether the understanding of ministry received from sister churches in Europe and America is the only viable form of the ordained ministry in Africa today. The salaried ministry, though ideal in the sense that the pastor is free to respond to every emergency situation when called upon, is no longer affordable in today’s Africa. There is need to evolve new forms or patterns of the ordained ministry to support the few ministers employed by the church. Other churches have experimented with forms of “tent making” ministry. This model is clearly a more affordable form of ministry in Africa and is very much in line with African traditional patterns of religious leadership. Yet it is meeting with considerable resistance from church leaders, primarily, in my view, because they fear losing control over the better educated section of the clergy.

The matter of leadership development in Africa has been in the forefront of the Lutheran World Federation’s program for theological education. The church in Africa, including the Lutheran church, needs to produce a new type of leader who is properly prepared to meet the challenges of present-day Africa. As part of the church’s role in nation building and development, there is need for a theological education that will produce an affordable ministry and one that will affirm a holistic approach to life. To be effective, Lutheranism must not compartmentalize the Christian ministry by limiting the minister’s training and role to spiritual matters only. The church must rather be open to specializations within the ordained ministry and allow for new and diverse initiatives in its service to the people of God. It must recognize that “the principle of diversification entails recognition that service of Word and Sacrament is more
central to some forms of the ordained ministry than to others; not every ordained minister must perform all functions, or perform them in equal measure.”

In this connection it will be instructive to study traditional models of leadership in Africa for elements that could contribute to the formation of a relevant and effective Christian ministry within the Lutheran churches.

Finally, Lutheranism in Africa will have to grapple seriously with stewardship concerns. The dependency syndrome of most of the African churches needs to be brought to an end. There is certainly a great deal of poverty in Africa, but there is some question whether Lutheran ecumenical partners in the north are genuinely interested in seeing self-reliant Lutheran churches in Africa. African churches and their partners abroad need to deliberate as to how funds invested in Africa can be used to establish self-reliant churches. Moreover, stewardship concerns the care of all that God has entrusted to us, and this extends to the need to include learning new and more effective ways to care for the entire environment.

See the Lutheran World Federation statement *The Lutheran Understanding of Ministry: Statement on the Basis of an LWF Study Project* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1983) 11, no. 27.