Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity

Exploratory Essays in Moral Theology

J.N.K. Mugambi
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editors
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This volume is the third of an on-going series investigating various features of African Christianity. It is concerned with African moral theology and African Christian ethics. Morality is the sum total of the principles that influence or should influence the behaviour of a Christian. The sources of Christian morality are scripture, teachings of the Church, reason inspired by faith and in the African context some of the teachings of ancestors. From the African perspective life is seen as an integral whole, and religion is the fabric that holds life together. The papers in this volume, although diverse, should be studied with this understanding.

Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity is designed to cover various aspects of African Christianity from the perspective of African theologians. The entire project is intended to explore all the personal features of Christian theology from the viewpoint of African Christians on the basis of sound theological research and argumentation. The first volume (Jesus in African Christianity) deals with Christology; the second (The Church in African Christianity) is on Ecclesiology. The series has been sustained by a symposium of scholars from Eastern Africa who have continued to consult one another with total commitment to an open-minded, ecumenical and multi-disciplinary approach.

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Social Ethics: A Christocentric Perspective

P. N. Wachege

The themes of social ethics are relevant, legitimate and weighty to warrant a symposium. Yet, the contention is that in such investigations an underlying Christocentricity is initially called for if one is to do justice to people’s needs, aspirations, thought forms and mentality in understanding, presenting and concretely interpreting Christian morality/social ethics. It is such an endeavour which this chapter intends to wholeheartedly grapple with. To accomplish this more meaningfully, a discussion ensues with the dialogue between L. Boff’s Jesus the Liberator and the Agikuyu Muthamaki Christology for mutual enrichment and complementarity in view of social ethics thereby coming up with a new way of doing liberation theology hopefully more beneficial to our African people.

L. Boff’s Christology

L. Boff is a Franciscan priest who has established himself as one of the most creative, reflective and serious Third World Christologists. He did his studies mainly in his native country of Brazil and in Munich, Germany where he encountered and benefitted from scholars such as K. Rahner. Presently, he is a professor of theology in Petropolis, Brazil. He is also an adviser to the Brazilian Conference of Bishops and the Latin American Conference of Religion. Besides such involvement, he also lives and works among the poor people in ecclesial communities.

Boff is a well-known liberation theologian and also an influential one within and outside Latin America. He has come up with a systematic liberation Christology which stresses the historical Jesus over the Christ of
faith which is appropriate and relevant to our contemporary situation. In this he is influenced by the Latin American consciousness of prevailing pervasive captivity, exile-alienating factors and moral decadence. He is also influenced by ecclesiastical commitment to the new socio-economic and political endeavour which is less academic but more experiential.

Another vital influence in his Christological method is that of the hermeneutic circle which J. L. Segundo defines as “the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal.” This assists Boff to interpret the Gospel anew, utilizing the innovative insights and thereby rightfully presenting Jesus Christ as the Liberator from socio-economic and political oppression and indeed from all subjugations of sin. The other influencing factor is contemporary Christians’ swaying in expressing faith in Jesus Christ and their demand for innovative Christological titles. He propagates a daring call to liberate Jesus Christ from confusing elitist precapitulations in order to reveal and witness to the authentic Jesus Christ. This attitude is expressed in his Christological pre- legomenon:

To believe in Christ as an existential act and way of life is to confront the totality of my personal, social, ecclesiastical, and cultural life with the reality of Jesus. Faith is realized in the encounter of allowing life and its problems to be interpreted and questioned by Christ and his message. On the other hand, we interrogate Christ, we go to him with our problems and we seek in him an answer for the human condition. It is in this dialogue that faith is strengthened and Christ inserted into the general context of existence. To have faith signifies having the capacity to listen to his voice, which speaks within our situation. Every true encounter with Christ brings us to a crisis that acts as a purifying and refining crucible. In him we find a human depth that challenges us. The root structures of humanity are made tangible in his life and words; his relationship with the Absolute awakens the memory of what we all should be.

By way of liberation outlook rather than starting with theoretical abstractions of theologian principles of development, Boff analyses the existential concrete Latin American situation. He does so while dwelling on the political, ideological and economic causes of social inequality thereby explicating how and why Jesus Christ is the authentic Liberator under such discriminatory, alienating, exploitative and oppressive circumstances. His is a critical Christological reflection with a significant deep focus on Christ in view of the poor who are misery-alienated, dehumanized and depersonalized through socio-economic structures of the capitalists and establishment imperialist systems of enslaving impoverishing dependence. What F. S. Florescu remarks on liberation theologies in general holds true of Boff that:

Notwithstanding the diversity of liberation theologies, they share a common theological methodology. This methodology brings to the fore within theology an awareness of the sociology of knowledge, since it underscores the interrelation between theory and praxis. It outlines the social and cultural conditions of theoretical concepts and institutional patterns. Therefore, it encourages theology to become more self-reflexive about the socio-political basis of its religious symbols and their consequential praxis. It advocates a practical as well as theoretical role for theology as discipline.

In connection with the above, there are five characteristics of Latin American theology which necessarily influence his Christology. These are the primacy of the anthropological element over the ecclesiastical, the utopian element over the factual, the critical element over the dogmatic, the social over the personal and orthopraxis over orthodoxy. No wonder he justifies his Christology in his Latin American situation.

Boff critically explains Jesus Christ as the perfect exemplary in warding off such servitude reality and sin basically from social situations of unjust structures thanks to the fact that by his conduct, words, actions and indeed whole life as Jesus of Nazareth, he proves to be Liberator par excellence. In the midst of all the sufferings and corresponding injustices, Boff sees him—in collaboration with his genuine followers—as the initiator of hope and appreciation of the condition of the sufferers and struggling people. Although Boff focuses more on praxis and somehow employs a marxist analysis with regard to social realities, his Christology shows that he is not blind to metaphysics, nor is he to be discarded as a marxist-oriented Christologist. It is in the light and interpretation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that he critically reflects with an active commitment the historical realities of his Latin American people.

Aigikuyu Muthamaki Christology Explicating Moral/Ethical Worth

This work is an exercise in Christology based on African values, more specifically, the Aigikuyu concept of elder (ideal elder). It is also an exercise in inculturation. In this connection, the work is both anthropological (as explicated in the first part which explains the concept of elder in the
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Boff’s Christology is from below—starting from the “secular” Jesus to the son of God. His socio-analytical approach to his society and his biblical presentation of Jesus Christ as the unique Liberator from oppressive situations and realities is an enormous contribution to Christology. On account of this, the Agikuyu Machamaki Christology is able to present Jesus Christ better as the Muthamaki who eminently accomplishes his liberating mission. The image of Christ as Liberator, according to Boff’s presentation, is so human and so close to the poor, the depressed, the dehumanized and indeed to all, is an important complement to our Christology. This is particularly so in making it possible for Agikuyu Christology to address itself to the poor, marginalized and urbanized people who are greatly alienated from the cultural values of elderhood. Moreover, his Christology is of great utility for Africa because it addresses itself to Africans who also need to eradicate enslaving evils and sinfulness, including the oppressive elements condoned by Agikuyu elderhood customs.

While Boff’s Christology is from below, starting from the “secular” Jesus to the son of God, Agikuyu is simultaneously from below and from above. The religious dimension is inseparable from Christ seen as Machamaki. The way we incorporate as we employ African cultural elements, biblical-theological data as well as African philosophy, is less prone to over-stressing Jesus Christ within socio-political perspectives or even being in danger of getting too involved in marxist sociological categories. Agikuyu Christology would help liberate Boff’s from such inclinations as his can help to liberate ours from particularism.

Boff’s Christology borrows from marxist philosophy. In his endeavour to explicate Jesus Christ as Liberator and his emphasis on orthopraxy over orthodoxy, Boff over-stresses the dialectical approach over the metaphysical. Unlike marxists, he manifests a strong Christian commitment and respect for the Church despite some notable controversy. Agikuyu Christology, on the other hand, is primarily elaborated from a traditional world-view, which is radically incompatible with marxist ideologies.

One of the main points which Boff (and others) could learn from the above observations is the “new way” of doing liberation theology in view of social ethics by taking inculturation as a point of departure for the theology of liberation. In order to achieve the desired goal it is not enough to do the theology of inculturation (each such theology is liberating), but one must have the explicit intention of taking such an inculturational approach as a starting point for the theology of liberation from socio-economic oppression. This approach has various advantages over the one which is taken by Boff and other liberation theologians.

Social Ethics: A Christocentric Perspective

There is another way of doing liberation theology in view of social ethics. The theologian who intends to construct a liberation theology from socio-economic and political oppression must start from the culture and social situation of the country or society in which such oppression is found. One must then elaborate a theology which strives to liberate the oppression starting from the global cultural and social situation with which the socio-economic and political elements are closely linked.

This way of doing liberation theology has various advantages. It necessarily links the inculturation and liberation types of theology. It attacks the evil of oppression from within and thus avoids the error of isolating the problem of socio-economic and political oppression from its social and cultural background. It immediately leads to a theology of integral liberation and easily avoids the danger of political reduction in theology. Thus a Christology of liberation constructed in this manner is much less prone to see Christ as only a political revolutionary.

Here is a concrete example of an “inculturation-liberation theology” (the name proposed for such theology). Suppose that society suffers from socio-economic and political oppression and one wants to construct a liberation Christology for that society. The first step suggested for such Christology is to study the cultural and social situation of society Z. Suppose that society Z’s world-view is basically vitalistic, then one must conclude that their cultural situation is one of oppression. An analysis of the situation involves two steps. A study of the social situation will involve the analysis of the problem of socio-economic and political oppression in society Z. The problem is examined in its roots in the North-South relationships and then in the light of society Z’s vitalistic world-view. In the latter case, such oppression will appear as hampering not only society Z’s socio-economic and political welfare but also the people’s way of life (and personality). Most likely such study will show that similar oppression also exists among the members of society Z.

Once the above analysis has been carried out, one can then proceed to construct a relevant suggested Christology from the cultural situation. Christ is the fulness of life in the sense of society Z. Hence he is Liberator of society Z in the sense that he is the highest accomplishment of their understanding of life (analogical approach; liberation for the status quo, as explained above). Here also the members of society Z will discover that they are also oppressors of themselves and others. Christ is, consequently, Liberator of society Z’s socio-economic and political oppression, since it is fundamentally opposed to the fulness of life he intends for society Z in an integral way. In this case socio-economic and
context of Agikuyu social life and theological (as elaborated in the second part which is an application—Mutuut muusanda—of the concept of the Agikuyu elder to Christ).

It is possible to reflect systematically on Christ's mystery from the perspective of Agikuyu sense of elderhood. In this connection, the working hypothesis is that Jesus Christ can be called a Muthamaki but a Muthamaki par excellence. Eventually, an explanation is arrived at that, in view of the principle of the interconnection of Christian mysteries, Christology has implications for an understanding of the Trinity, incarnation, redemption, ecclesiology and indeed, social ethics. The goal or finality of Christology is also specified as well as pastoral relevance/implications.

After a critical analysis of the Agikuyu and Christian conceptions of elderhood, one of the most striking inferences which immediately comes to mind is that in the many parallels between the Agikuyu and Christian understanding of elderhood there are indications that the Agikuyu tribal customs on this issue are basically good and contain positive values which are certainly a gift from God Himself. As such, they are excellent preparatory roads for the gospel message not only on the mystery of Christ, but on Christian social life as well.

Comparing Boff's Christology with Agikuyu Muthamaki Christology

The two Christologies are reasonably modern presentations of the historical Jesus without ignoring the Christ of faith. Yet, whereas Boff's point of departure for his Christology is the situation of oppression and poverty in his country, ours starts from Agikuyu cultural and religious heritage, with special reference to Agikuyu elderhood. So, each of us responds to his own people's needs in their particular situations thereby initiating relevant Christological spirituality on what people should and should not do, how they ought to be and how they should think as followers of Jesus Christ. Thus in Boff's Christology Jesus Christ becomes the true model and ultimate source of liberation; hence the attribute, Liberator, which Boff ascribed to him. While in ours, Jesus Christ becomes the Muthamaki par excellence. This difference in points of departure involves several important divergences which are vital for social ethics.

Boff's Christology is primarily one of liberation from socio-economic evils from outside and from the inside, and secondly from sin and its sequel (integral liberation). That is why his is a Christology imbued with political elements in which he critically employs socio-analytical and hemeneutic mediators which lead him to come up with Jesus Christ as the answer to human struggle for liberation thereby effecting moral-theological uprightness. In this way he stresses the need for Christian commitment to the emancipation of the poor and the oppressed. Our Christology, on the other hand, strives to be primarily one of liberation of the Agikuyu traditional heritage from any oppressive factor. This immediately involves integral liberation including socio-economic evils. In Boff's case Christ is the dialectical opposite of the point of departure (situation of injustice and oppression) and comes to abolish that point of departure. For us, Christ is not in the same way the opposite of our point of departure (i.e. the positive values implied in the Agikuyu understanding of Muthamaki). He is, in fact, the analogical parallel to that starting point and, as such, he comes to accomplish the work he has already been performing among the Agikuyu Africans. Hence, whereas Boff's Christological approach is fundamentally dialectical, our approach is basically analogical. By accomplishing the work he was already doing among the Agikuyu, Christ liberates their culture.

Hence Boff's Christology is for the abolition of the status quo, but our Christology is, to a certain extent, for the preservation of the status quo against the views current in the past in so far as it is the work of Christ. Yet, even we ourselves are for the modification of the status quo not in the sense of its total abolition but of its fulfillment. Hence, in our Christology there is a continuity between the status quo and the new result of Christ's transforming activity. In Boff's Christology there is radical discontinuity. Briefly n, Boff's Christology is one of liberation from the status quo, but ours is in a certain sense a Christology of liberation for the status quo.

Boff's primary enemies of freedom and justice are external and internal socio-economic and political oppressors. Our primary enemies are external and internal. The external foes are against African authenticity—those who despise African traditional cultures as purely erroneous or superstitious, or those who threaten to extinguish such cultures through secularization or other forms of cultural domination. The internal enemies are those errors and other forms of evil found in the Agikuyu traditional and modern societies. By combating these enemies we are consequently led to combat the socio-economic and political oppressors as well because Agikuyu elderhood is closely linked with socio-economic and political factors.
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One of the main points which Boff (and others) could learn from the above observations is the “new way” of doing liberation theology in view of social ethics by taking inculturation as a point of departure for the theology of liberation. In order to achieve the desired goal it is not enough to do the theology of inculturation (each such theology is liberation), but one must have the explicit intention of taking such an inculturational approach as a starting point for the theology of liberation from socio-economic oppression. This approach has various advantages over the one which is taken by Boff and other liberation theologians.

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This way of doing liberation theology has various advantages. It necessarily links the inculturation and liberation types of theology. It attacks the evil of oppression from within and thus avoids the error of isolating the problem of socio-economic and political oppression from its social and cultural background. It immediately leads to a theology of integral liberation and easily avoids the danger of political reduction in theology. Thus, a Christology of liberation constructed in this manner is much less prone to see Christ as only a political revolutionary.

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Once the above analysis has been carried out, one can then proceed to construct a relevant suggested Christology from the cultural situation. Christ is the fulness of life in the sense of society Z. Hence, he is Liberator of society Z in the sense that he is the highest accomplishment of their understanding of life (analogue approach; liberation for the status quo, as explained above). Here also the members of society Z will discover that they are also oppressors of themselves and others. Christ is, consequently, Liberator of society Z’s socio-economic and political oppression, since it is fundamentally opposed to the fullness of life he intends for society Z in an integral way. In this case socio-economic and
political oppression will be seen as only one of the evils which attack fullness of life. Hence, the theologian is easily preserved from socio-political reductionism and is easily conducted to integral liberation. The result is liberation (conversion) of members of society to follow Christ who is fullness of life and, in that way, Liberator. In this manner the members will be prepared for true Liberation after external oppression has been vanquished. Finally, there is liberation (conversion) of external socio-economic and political oppressors by spiritual means (prayers, proclamation of the word of God, good example) and secular means (peaceful means and, as last resort, violent means).

There are several advantages which this approach has over the ones taken by many liberation theologians (especially in Latin American). This is a more comprehensive and realistic approach to liberation; it situates the problem in the total cultural and social setting in which it is found. There is immediate insistence on conversion of all (oppressor and oppressed) to follow Christ the Liberator (fullness of life) as the basic condition for true and lasting liberation (hence the insistence on attacking sin as a primary task of liberation movement). Everyone, including the poor or oppressed, is an oppressor, first of himself/herself and then of others. Other liberation theologians often see the others only as sinners and oppressors. The insistence on conversion is a good and necessary preparation for true and lasting liberation when external oppression will have been removed. Other theologians usually don’t prepare the poor or oppressed for future liberation. There is also love of the oppressor as well as effort to liberate the oppressor.

Notes
2. See Boff and Boff, 1987; McBrien, 1984, p. 491.
8. For clarity, see Boff and Boff, 1987.