

The Contributions of Éloi Messi Metogo to Christian Theology.

God, Religiosity in Africa and Methodology

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Introduction

Professor Éloi Messi Metogo (1952-2017) was a Cameroonian Dominican priest, theologian and anthropologist. After his multi-disciplinary academic formation in different parts of Africa and Europe, he spent most of his academic life at the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Central Africa, Yaoundé, Cameroon. Professor Metogo was an influential figure and his theological reflections were widely diffused, especially in his native Cameroon. Unfortunately, he did not publish much. For this reason, this essay is largely based on the ideas he expressed in his most renowned work, *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique?* However, since a considerable part of his theological reflections in the post-*Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique?* era is still unedited, I decided to interview some of his former students, one in Cameroon and two in Rome, in order to be updated on the development of his theological ideas up till the time of his death. Éloi Messi dealt with a number of issues regarding the practice of religion and the development of Christian theology in sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, in this article, I will concentrate on two aspects of his academic life. Firstly, I will comment on his most famous thesis on belief in God and religiosity in sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, I will seek to trigger a conversation on an aspect of his work that I consider largely under-explored; his approach to theological investigation.

God and religiosity in Africa

It has often been taken for granted that atheism does not exist in the African *weltanschauung* as the society is thought to be suffused with religiosity. However, Metogo was the first major author to challenge the widely held view in both academic and ecclesial circles that the African is intrinsically religious by nature. This essentialist view of African religiosity is found in the works of some major scholars of religion in Africa (see Parrinder 1961; Idowu 1962; Mbiti 1970, 1990; Awolalu and Dopamu 1979). In fact, Mbiti is famous for saying that “Africans are notoriously religious” (Mbiti 1990: 1). Mbiti also argues that even though many African languages do not have a word for religion, it “accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death” (Mbiti 1990: 2). This is to say that religious belief so permeates the life of the African that it cannot be separated from him/her, even conceptually. Contrarily, Metogo holds that Africans are not religious by nature because there are myths that demonstrate religious indifference and atheism in Africa. These are cases in which either the concept of God does not exist or people make the deliberate choice of not believing in God (Metogo 1997: 36-39). Against an essentialist view of religion in Africa, Metogo posits that Africans often adopt a functional approach to religion. He argues that a lot of Africans believe in God because religion serves various purposes for them. According to him, for the African, religion does not only serve as a last resort to the poor, but it also serves as a tool for social control and

means of consolidating power by the ruling class. Unfortunately, rather than being an agent for positive social change, religion, sometimes, retards the processes of social change on the continent by reinforcing existing social systems and legitimizing the power of the ruling class (Metogo 1997: 14).

Critique

It is pertinent to note that Prof. Metogo's thesis that Africans are not religious by nature was not entirely new. Before him, scholars from different fields in the humanities and social sciences were already reflecting on the question of religious indifference in general (see Girardi and Six 1967; Secretariat Pour Les Non Croyants 1983). However, my principal objection to Metogo's position on African religiosity is that he tends to over-emphasize the functional role of religion while downplaying the African's investigation into the nature of God. In fact, functionalism is tied to his approach to both culture and religion. Because of this tendency towards a highly functional view of religion, investigation into the transcendental dimension of African religiosity (the essence of God) risks being under-explored or even neglected. By the transcendental aspect of religion, I mean not only the search for the essence of God but also the development of Christian doctrines on the continent. This risk has been highlighted by Gifford (2015) as he decries the emphasis on physical and material prosperity by Pentecostal Churches in Africa and the 'NGO-ization' of Catholic Church. In his study of contemporary Christianity in Africa, Gifford (2015) laments both the materialistic drive of Pentecostal Christianity and the manner in which the Catholic Church is involved in different forms of development projects ranging from micro-finance, human rights issues, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, election monitoring to digging of wells in communities. These, at times, come at the expense of paying adequate attention to the 'purely' spiritual needs of the faithful. The African theologian needs to strike a balance between explaining the mysteries of the faith and social action. Metogo's tilt towards a functional view of religiosity in sub-Saharan Africa could give impetus to theologians and pastoral workers who are solely driven by social action to the detriment of the inner spiritual growth of the faithful. Of course, Metogo is right in arguing that, apart

from spiritual matters, theology should also be concerned with the material, social, economic and political structures in which Africans find themselves (Metogo 1985; Metogo 1997: 215). However, my take is that, to further develop theology in Africa, African theologians must go beyond merely reflecting on theological responses to the material and emotional needs of the faithful. The history of the development of theology, especially in the West, demonstrates the key role played by monasteries and convents as centres of theological reflection and the development of Christian doctrines, liturgy, and spirituality. The Church's social action should flow from her articulation of doctrine, ecclesiology, liturgy, and the mysteries of the faith. By this, I mean that there should not just be a relationship between theory and practice, but that practice should be inspired by theory. Otherwise, practice without a guiding theory is dangerous to the faith itself.

Nevertheless, Metogo has taken the discourse on African religiosity to another level by challenging a long-held intellectual tradition that Africans are religious by nature. This could have been an interesting intellectual debate that would have enriched the understanding of religion and religiosity in Africa as well as the development of theology on the continent. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, until his death in October 2017, no Africanist scholar of notable repute has, as Metogo did with empirical evidence, challenged, refuted, confirmed or deepened his position on religiosity in Africa. Apart from challenging the validity of Metogo's claim on religiosity on the continent, his postulation could have been a good starting point (offering a theoretical basis) for a deeper conversation on the rise and spread of prosperity gospel, healing ministries, increasing religious pluralism and the resurgence of pre-Christian beliefs and practices in sub-Saharan Africa. A lot of these phenomena are strongly correlated with a functional approach to religion as exemplified in the search for physical, emotional and material well-being.

Methodology

The second major contribution of Metogo to Christian theology, in my opinion, is his methodology. It might be important to quickly note that Metogo's methodological approach is not entirely original as he was strongly influenced both by his personal interactions with as well as the works of

theologians and social scientists like Claude Geffré, Jean-Marc Ela and Bernard Lonergan. It is therefore no surprise that Prof. Metogo was eclectic or interdisciplinary in his theological reflection as he laid a lot of emphasis on the role of culture and the contextualization of theology. He argues that there is no single way of doing theology and that the understanding of God cannot be universalized because religious experience is neither single nor static. Therefore, theological reflection must be contextual, dynamic and creative. According to him, theologians must understand that society is in constant evolution and that their audience are not passive receivers of information but creative subjects. That is, they are active agents who daily engage with their environments as they constantly reproduce their societies (Metogo 1997: 185-186). This makes it incumbent on theologians to seek to understand the culture of their audience and the socio-political systems that shape their lives. Hence, the duty of the preacher is not to simply declare the Word but to also bring it to the culture of the people. However, the contextualization of theological reflections should not hinder African theologians from engaging with the world. Metogo's methodological approach rejects contextualization as an excuse for methodological reductionism.

In sum, Prof. Metogo attempts to adopt a holistic approach (methodological holism) to doing theology and, in my opinion, his interdisciplinary approach to theology is an urgent call for theologians to open lines of conversation with other disciplines, especially, the social sciences. For too long, some theologians have been theologizing in splendid isolation, either underestimating the speed, magnitude and impact of social change in various societies, especially in African societies, or have deliberately refused to engage with society. Some theologians adopt a 'one-way traffic mentality' in which theology transmits information to the world without being open to the feedbacks that are necessary both for the development of theology and the ability to make the gospel relevant to people's lives. In the case of Africa, some scholars of religion blame the tensions in the African religio-social space - that is, among Christian denominations, between Christianity and other religions and between Christianity and the African society - on the inability of some theologians and pastoral agents to adequately read the signs of the times and respond

to them in a creative manner (Metuh 1985). From the forgoing, it could be argued that doing theology according to Metogo's vision would require sufficient knowledge of the social, political and cultural systems in Africa. This, therefore, makes it incumbent on theology students and researchers to have basic knowledge of relevant themes or courses in the social sciences like anthropology, sociology and even research methods in the social sciences. It is my hope that, following the example of Prof. Metogo's approach to theological investigation, this paper will impel to further discussions on how the social sciences can be at the service of theology.

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