

“And You, Africans,
Who Do You Say Jesus Is?”:
The Legacy of Laurenti Magesa
for the Future of African Theology

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Abstract: A healthy church is a church not afraid to journey into the new horizon the Spirit invites it to explore. To embark on this journey, such a church needs bold theologians. Theology, at its best, embodies the ability to make relevant God’s enduring word of life for all in the world. This vocation of a theologian is fully embodied in the works and life of Laurenti Magesa, an African priest and theologian from Tanzania. Throughout his adult life, Magesa asked the unsettling questions that spark needed dialogue among theologians and fellow Christians around the world. This article attempts to retrieve key insights from his vast array of works. Finally, the article argues for new horizons theologians from Africa ought to set their gaze on as they attempt to address social and religious issues plaguing the African continent.

THE VOCATION OF A THEOLOGIAN IS TO BE A MEDIUM FOR God’s life to all, especially those pushed to the peripheries of society. To do this effectively, the theologian ought to use all their senses to read closely the signs of the times in such a manner that they are able to mediate social transformation. In a world where the false dualism of centers and peripheries is used as tool to take away those without power from the fountain of life, the theologian must necessarily become an ethical voice of reason and instrument of God’s grace working against such structures. A preferential option for the poor and the marginalized is the light that must guide the theologian’s work. The vocation of theologian was well reflected in the person and ministry of Laurenti Magesa. As a theologian, Magesa worked actively at reclaiming elements of African social and ethical thought to articulate a theological ethics of abundant life for his fellow Africans and the world in general. His approach to doing theology stands as a testament to how theology ought to be done today on the African continent and in the global community. His is a gift to the world church and communities that insist on working for

the common good.¹ Magesa keeps on asking Africans the pneumatological question: “Who do you say that I am?” His question offers a pathway for reflecting on how to do theology both in the church in Africa and the global context, in a manner that births forth life for all. This question also forces theologians today to be in dialogue with the world while trusting that the Spirit of life will be the source of wisdom for all.

The following argument will involve four reflective movements relevant for the theological imagination that ought to be active both in the African church and other parts of the global church today. First, it is important to shed light on reading the signs of the times as the place and source where the life of the church plays out and from which the insights for doing theology ought to be derived, while also being attentive to the pneumatological summons that makes the church a living entity relevant to each epoch of human history. Second, it is also important to reclaim a healthy understanding of the role of the theologian and her place in the life of the Catholic Church. The third movement will offer a decolonial critique of Africa and its collective imagination. It will attempt to unpack the vestiges of colonial trauma as well as the possibilities for progress unfolding on the continent. The final movement will offer ways African theologians can make this era a moment of saturated grace with new possibilities and imaginations to help advance the voice of Africa in ecclesial, political, social, economic, and cultural discourses. In each of these movements, I will attempt to retrieve the voice and witness of Magesa to show how he embodied a healthy way of doing theology, especially within the context of Africa.

TOWARDS A PNEUMATOLOGICAL SUMMONS

The debate over the question of who should teach in the Catholic Church is not a new one. In fact, one can argue that it is tied to all the subdisciplines of theology, be it sacramental theology, moral theology, soteriology, Christology, pneumatology, or ecclesiology. Why is this the case? To answer this question, one must return to the basics of Christianity. The Gospels offer us a glimpse at how to address this question. Reading the Johannine account of the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary of Magdala (John 20:11–18), one notices that two things occur. First, the risen Christ reveals the founding truth of what his entire mission was meant to be; namely, that God who became one with creation and was killed, has risen from the dead. In other words, death can no longer have the last word in the

¹ I thank the members of the Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network (PACTPAN) for inviting me to give the inaugural Prof. Laurenti Magesa Memorial Lecture. It is truly an honor on my part because of how influential Magesa was on my own career as a theologian.

destiny of all that God created. Second, belief in this truth is also a summon to become an announcer of this good news. To become a follower of the risen Christ, one ought to embrace the evangelizing or teaching role in the world and the community of believers either through words or by the witness of one's life.

The foundation of the theological vocation is baptism. To be a follower of Christ is to take seriously the role of being a teacher. However beautiful this statement may sound, one has to ask the question: What is the content of theology or how can the content of faith as received by the church be passed on? In response to this question, I offer the following: all revelation is interpretation. Revelation is God speaking or encountering creation in the concreteness of its existence. However, the content of what is spoken can only be accessed through the mediation of interpretation. Interpretation is thus the praxis of reception at the heart of how revelation becomes relevant to each epoch in human history. Note, this does not mean that reception is to be understood as something static (*semper idem*), like an archival material deposited in some religious storage. No! Revelation is itself dynamic in the sense that it is a living reality. By this, I mean that the encounter we have with the divine always unfolds as a continuum. This continuum is mediated or received through the rituals of discernment.² Reception legitimizes the work of the Spirit in responding to the signs of the times. Without this response, the transmission of received teachings is not evangelizing but rather colonizing. Stated differently, reception is an active process conditioned by a pneumatological turn to see within the realities surrounding the local church the dynamic application of what has been received on the realities playing out in the respective contexts of the faith community. In fact, this pneumatological turn is inherent to the reception that brings revelation always within the domain of the ethical. This point can be stated simply by the words of Jesus: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).³ Revelation is always within the domain of ethics; hence it evokes in the recipients

² By ritual, I mean the totality of the embodied experience and agency by which the church discerns how and what God is saying to creation. It is also worth noting that the continuum of the encounter with the divine is itself always oriented toward concrete relationality. God does not reveal Godself just for the sake of revealing. In fact, revelation is at its core oriented towards relationality. To reveal is to enter into a relationship with the recipient of revelation. God is always revealing Godself to creation due to the fact that creation is conditioned by finite history. God's *kairos* moment of encounter is experienced in the finiteness of creation's history. It is this epochal relevance of God's self-revelation that makes concrete to creation the enduring presence of God as an encountering God.

³ All biblical citations are from the *New American Bible, revised edition* (Washington, DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 2010).

the praxis of reading the signs of the times, which is what reception is all about.

Furthermore, from a Christological point of view, even the gift of the incarnation itself is an interpretation. Becoming one with creation is how God receives creation, and also how creation responds to the invitation to be one with God, a process God initiates. The incarnation is thus not just a truth about the work of God in creation. It is also how God has centered both reception and interpretation as modes of encountering God. Since the incarnation is itself God’s self-revelation, one can conclude that it embodies and evokes an ethical consciousness. The new humanity in Christ is a humanity that has pneuma-ethical consciousness. It is a Spirit-centered body that mediates the good life for all. Stated differently, this movement of God revealing Godself to creation allows for a hermeneutical praxis that becomes possible when one understands the incarnation not solely as an event in a particular moment of history. Rather, it is an event unfolding throughout history. This unfolding process plays itself out within different contexts, and the latter play a role in how the event reveals itself, is embraced, understood, and applied. This unfolding evokes and mediates an ethical consciousness speaking to all that is at stake at each moment of history in such a manner that it orients itself to what must be addressed at each particular epoch. No single approach fits all contexts. This is the issue at stake today in the theological world: some still think context does not matter.

Reception is what makes context matter and also validates context as the authentic place and way revelation is mediated or epiphanized. In other words, insofar as it is epiphanic, revelation is always an interpretation within the domain of reception. What is spoken by God must always be received, and in the process of reception, interpretation becomes the pneumatological tool making the content of revelation a living content that speaks to the concrete context of the community receiving it (this is where it becomes a pneuma-ethical turn, if it is to be the source of life). Without interpretation (reception), revelation itself cannot be accessible because interpretation (reception) makes valid and relevant the realities shaping a people’s socio-cultural, religious, and political contexts.

At this point, it is important to address the following question: How can revelation be justified (validated), if its reception and meaning to a community are conditioned by the praxis and rituals of interpretation (reception)? To address this question clearly, one has to unpack the different movements inherent to the process of reception. The place of ecclesial awareness of what theologically is referred to as *sensus fidelium*—the sense of the faithful—is important in this process. Justification of revelation or, in this case, the interpretative reception thereof is grounded in ecclesial discernment, or what is ordinarily known as ecclesial infallibility. Ecclesial infallibility is expressed

through the *sensus fidelium* in manner that the Petrine office becomes a tool serving and making visible the *koinonia* (fellowship) of churches that revelation invokes in the followers of Christ, but which must also be contextualized. The contextualization of revelation is what brings about the *koinonia* of the churches and the witness to the living nature of God's revelation that offers contextual responses to the needs of a particular church. Does this mean the Petrine office is not necessary? The simple answer is no. However, the Petrine office is not intended to blur the contextual nuances playing out in each epoch or context. This, again, is at the heart of the debate between those who argue that dogma must be understood as having one meaning in a literal manner and those who argue that dogma is but an attempt to shed light on the vast boundaries in which the nuances of the hermeneutic reception of a truth play out.

In its infallible role in matters dealing with faith and morals, the Petrine office does not invent dogmas or truths. Rather, its teachings originate organically from the praxis of truths already playing out in the church. In this case, the sense of the faithful within the church is the fountain from which the Petrine office draws its insights. The Petrine office does not turn its gaze away from the *sensus fidelium* when it is articulating a dogmatic teaching; it rather turns its gaze towards the *sensus fidelium* because it finds there its validation, purpose, relevance, and the content of what it teaches definitively. "Definitively" is not to be understood to mean *semper idem* (always the same). Rather, it means that light has been shown on a matter to allow people to see the latter's nuanced boundaries.

Before continuing to unpack the relation between the Petrine office and the *sensus fidelium*, it is important to state a point that seems to have been lost in the unfolding debates on doctrinal orthodoxy. Because revelation is always ethical, in the sense that it orients its recipients towards the good life, the mediating roles of the Petrine office and the *sensus fidelium* must also evoke an ethical orientation. Thus, orthodoxy does not only mean correct teaching. Rather, it means correct teaching that mediates an embodied experience of abundant life. Thus, fidelity to the teachings of Christ must necessarily be tested by the fruits of fidelity itself. These fruits must be abundant life for all and the eradication of structures of evil that perpetuate the false dualism of centers and peripheries. I am convinced that this unspoken theological awareness shaped the church's approach in the definition of papal infallibility to be dealing with matters of faith and morals. Emphasis ought to be placed on the conjunction "and." Faith means nothing unless it births forth the good life experienced in an embodied manner. Morality means nothing unless it mediates the growth of healthy faith.

Furthermore, the *sensus fidelium* is itself constituted by nuances and differences that become sources of filiality among the faithful and their respective episcopal expressions of the One Church of Christ. Since the *sensus fidelium* is constituted by difference, then, the Petrine office is itself oriented toward holding in place the nuances and differences that constitute the church as both one and many. When the Petrine office ignores these two movements in the church—the one and many—problems arise. This, I would suggest, is what Pope Francis is attempting to avoid in his papacy. He is trying to hold both the one and the many in place and thus address the problem that occurs when there is an imbalance. While working to accentuate the oneness of the church, he is insisting—via synodality—on upholding the particularities of the respective churches. Francis has recently updated the mandate of the Pontifical Theological Academy to focus on a theological vision in step with a church that adequately responds to the signs of the times. A living and dynamic church must necessarily produce and teach a living and dynamic theology addressing the issues that face the world and all of God’s creatures.⁴ He is not the first to attempt to do this. The founding of the Pontifical Theological Academy by Pope Clement XI on April 23, 1718, through the papal brief *Inscrutabili* bears witness to an attempt to balance the dynamics between the one and many in relation to the church universal and the church particular. *Inscrutabili* was intended to address the re-emergence of Jansenism in France, and mitigate the resistance expressed at least by some prominent ecclesiastics against the papal bull *Unigenitus Dei Filius*, issued by Clement XI on September 8, 1713, condemning Jansenism for good.⁵ While Francis seems to be succeeding, the same cannot be said of previous attempts. For example, an attempt was made in the nineteenth century at the height of the debate between the Ultramontanists and the Gallicanists on where authority ultimately lies in the church. In fact, the debate can be said to have originated during the conciliarist struggles that began in the twelfth century among canonists on the limits of papal authority.⁶ Though the First Vatican Council got it right by juxtaposing faith and morals in its discourse on revelation, the resolution adopted to resolve the theological dispute on where ultimate authority resides in the

⁴ See Francis, *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, November 1, 2023, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html. See also Tiziana Campisi, “Pope: Theology Must Interpret the Gospel for Today’s World,” *Vatican News*, November 1, 2023, www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-11/pope-francis-motu-proprio-pontifical-theology-academy.html.

⁵ See “Unigenitus,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 27, 2020, www.britannica.com/topic/Unigenitus.

⁶ For a detailed study of the decision-making process in the Catholic Church, see Paul Valliere, *Conciliarism: A History of Decision-Making in the Church* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

church was tilted towards the oneness of the Catholic Church (Ultramontanists) in its definition of papal infallibility without much attention given to the many contexts that make up the church.⁷ The failure of the Council to address clearly the Gallicanists' position led to the unfortunate schism that saw the establishment of the Old Catholic Church or the Union of Utrecht.⁸

The Second Vatican Council attempted to do what Vatican I was unable to accomplish. It reclaimed the teaching office of the episcopacy in union with the Bishop of Rome and grounded all teaching in the organic reality of the Catholic Church's teaching ministry in fidelity to Christ, the utmost teacher in whom truth is incarnated.⁹ However, one can argue that the Second Vatican Council only succeeded in doing so theoretically but not in a ritualized manner within the daily life of the Catholic Church. By this, I mean that the church continues to struggle to be a church that takes seriously the baptismal grounding of the ministry of discernment at the heart of the teaching office. There is a clericalization of such a process; the Bishop of Rome, as successor of Peter, and the other bishops, as successors of the apostles, are understood as fully having the ability to make decisions for the church. I am convinced this shift to clerical identity in the decision process results from the fact that the church has forgotten that decision making is within the domain of discernment, and discernment embodies a pneumatological turn first grounded in baptism and not only in episcopal ordination.

Again, ecclesial infallibility binds all members of the church in the ritual space of teaching the faith to all within and outside the church either through words or by lifestyle. Unfortunately, some in the church tend to understand this reality of ecclesial infallibility as manifest only within the ministerial priesthood. I recall a homily given during a Chrism Mass by a bishop in Nigeria, some years ago, stating that the concept of church does not apply to all persons within it but solely to the bishops in and from whom the laity and ordained clergy derive their identity as members of the ecclesial reality. To put it categorically, he is incorrect.¹⁰ Baptism is what grounds and gives all

⁷ First Vatican Council, *Pastor Aeternus*, July 18, 1870, www.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/it/documents/constitutio-dogmatica-pastor-aeternus-18-iulii-1870.html.

⁸ See "Old Catholic Church," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 24, 2013, www.britannica.com/topic/old-catholic-church.

⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

¹⁰ He might be reading wrongly Ignatius of Antioch's *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, more about addressing issues that came up in the Church of Smyrna in Asia and not about the Catholic Church in its totality. See Luke Wilson, ed., "Ignatius of Antioch: Letter

their identities as members of the church. It is also what generates the possibility of embracing the teaching ministry all Christians are called to embody in word and action. I am not denying the fact that there are different ministries in the church. Rather, I am arguing that all ministries embody the different markers of the ministry of Christ—priest, teacher, and servant—because of how baptism embodies and transmits these markers. Also, all ministries have an ethical dimension because they are meant to concretize the mission of Christ to the world, which is to be an embodiment and source of abundant life for all.

THE ROLE OF A THEOLOGIAN IN THE CHURCH

What ought to be the role of a theologian today? The theologian’s fundamental role in the church is to be a reflective witness reading the signs of the times in a pneumatological manner that allows the church to offer a response in accordance to what God is inviting it to embody. This was exactly what Mary of Magdala did along with the followers of Christ who responded to the signs of the times playing out in their own historical epoch. The content of faith itself is found within the ritual space of reading the signs of the times. Stated differently, the theologian helps shed light on what the church ought to do in its collective response of discipleship. Consequently, the work of the theologian allows for the revelatory encounter of God with creation and the community to be a living one. The theologian helps the church to reflect on how God’s truth is dynamic in such a manner that it becomes relevant for each epoch and context. Dynamism or relevance speaks to the fact that the people of God are constantly on a pilgrimage which enables them to embrace a God who speaks to creation always in the present. In light of this fact, I would like to outline how one particular theologian, Laurenti Magesa, embodies this praxis of reading the signs of the times in a manner that allows for both church and society to be more attuned to ethical consciousness.

Laurenti Magesa was a Catholic priest and theologian from Tanzania, who passed away in 2022. He taught theology at various institutions in Africa, Europe, and North America. His insightful and creative approach to doing theology was matched by his simplicity of life and endearing nature. Diane Stinton states it well when she writes:

Even more notable than his academic prominence was Fr. Magesa’s personal character, especially humility. In his lifestyle, relationships, and vocation as a Roman Catholic priest, he lived out the simplicity of the gospel with insight and integrity. He combined academic teaching with priestly service at the grassroots level in rural Tanzania,

in ways that were mutually beneficial: he addressed the realities of African Christianity with candor and prophetic critique, while demonstrating particular concern for the marginalized whether on account of poverty, illness, gender, ethnic hostilities, or any other form of exclusion. I witnessed these dual facets of Fr. Magesa's life and character in two contexts. First, in 1988 he became a founding member of the Ecumenical Association of Eastern African Theologians (ESEAT), which I joined in 2004. ESEAT's annual symposia incorporated spiritual retreats with academic paper presentations on key themes, which would then be published as a book. Within this small-group setting, Magesa's intellectual acuity, personal wisdom, and pastoral care deeply strengthened the association—as especially did his generous mentoring of younger scholars.¹¹

In a monograph titled *The Church and Liberation in Africa*, Magesa—faithful to his vocation as a theologian within the context of the church in Africa—argued for a church truly attuned to the realities holding the continent captive. Central to Magesa's vision is a turn to liberation that unpacks the centrality of abundant life. In this work, Magesa plants his theological feet in an ecclesiology that will lead to multiple discourses on how to address the multiple colonialities holding Africa's social, economic, political, cultural, and religious imaginations captive.¹² Modelling how theologians should work, Magesa refuses to settle for a church that has become an instrument of colonialism and cultural violence as produced by the matrix of colonial traumas. Magesa belonged to a particular generation of African theologians and scholars who insisted on giving the church an African face, an African voice, an African imagination, and an African vision and praxis of being authentically human in the world. Here, I am conscious of such scholars as Jean-Marc Éla,¹³ Elochukwu Eugene

¹¹ Diane Stinton, "In Memoriam: Professor Laurenti Magesa (1946–2022)," *African Theology Worldwide* (October 2022), african.theologyworldwide.com/blog/in-memoriam-professor-laurenti-magesa-1946-2022.

¹² Laurenti Magesa, *The Church and Liberation in Africa* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba, 1976).

¹³ Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

Uzukwu,¹⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye,¹⁵ Teresia Mbari Hinga,¹⁶ John S. Mbiti,¹⁷ and many more.

Authentic liberation must be rooted in a healthy sense of self. Hence, Magesa dedicated some of his works like *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (1997); *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (2004); *Rethinking Mission: Evangelization in Africa in a New Era* (2006); *African Religion in the Dialogue Debate: From Intolerance to Coexistence* (2010); *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (2013); and *The Post-Conciliar Church in Africa: No Turning Back the Clock* (2016) to the plight of those at the peripheries of church and society with the intent to birth forth a healthy vision of how to be an ethical person. In each of these works, Magesa sheds light on what Africa has to offer not just to the world but to the church as well. Too often, Africa is presented in the global psyche as a continent with deficiencies, a continent in dire need of salvation, whether secular or religious. It is also a continent that has been exploited for its people and natural resources. Cognizant of the realities defining the continent, Magesa insists that liberation must be grounded in a turn to the rich spiritualities Africans have produced over the centuries. As a prophetic response to the savior-complex mentality that continues to define how many western missionaries and secular agents have encountered Africa and its people over the centuries, Magesa sheds light on the relevance of the African cosmos-focused vision of the human person-in-relation with God and other beings by insisting that to exist authentically, one must necessarily center life as a relational phenomenon binding all beings together, whether spiritual or material. In his words,

The imperative of community and harmony that determines the ethical agenda of life in African religion deeply concerns the ancestors. By their character and attributes, they link the individuals in a clan and the visible and invisible worlds. To be a human being, to be a *moral, ethical* person—*Mtu* (in Kiswahili) and *Muntu* (in nearly all other Bantu languages with slight phonetic variations)—it is not possible to live in isolation.¹⁸

¹⁴ Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006).

¹⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

¹⁶ Teresia Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

¹⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd revised and enlarged ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1990).

¹⁸ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 77.

Community is a central motif in Magesa's works. Again and again, he links community to the African consciousness of life mediated, sustained, and protected by the ancestors themselves, who serve as the media of "the actualization of resurrection" for Africans.¹⁹ As Magesa continued to argue in his works, for Africans belief in abundant life transcends the boundaries of one religion. This position is as African as it can get. In fact, community rooted in an ethical consciousness of abundant life for all is what Magesa argues to be at the core of African spirituality. By doing this, Magesa insists that spirituality is a relevant tool for addressing the ills Africa and its people face. In a world where secularism has become the *modus vivendi* for many, and where a turn to the sacred is frowned upon, Magesa argues for the retrieval of a way of being in the world that is not narcissistic, one that makes room for all to feel welcome and validated. Typical of his African roots, Magesa sees the human person as a being radically oriented towards otherness. To be authentically human, one has to live with a consciousness of the wellbeing of the other and a praxis instantiating that consciousness in concrete acts of kindness, support, and validation of the other—each being living for the other.²⁰

The work of a theologian is to stand at the crossroads of time as it plays out in the life of church and society. By this, I mean that, while reading the signs of the times, a theologian ought to ask the question: What is God telling us today as we inherit the past, and how can our consciousness allow us to embrace the future that is unfolding? This orientation allows the theologian not to settle for the fleeting comfort of the present or the nostalgic memory of the past. The future must be embraced as a possibility of surprises and creative opportunities for all. What I am arguing here is exactly what Francis calls for when he argues that theologians and ecclesiastical institutions must embrace a "radical paradigm shift" that allows for comprehensive engagement with the "epochal shifts" playing out in our world.²¹ Magesa was cognizant of the positionality the theologian ought to embrace and called for by Francis. Hence, in his work *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* he dedicated an entire section to unpacking what and how the future is unfolding in the context of Africa. Such themes as human freedom, the models of church to be embraced by African Christians, forms of political institutions that serve the common good, spiritualities that center the care of the

¹⁹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 78.

²⁰ Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

²¹ Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, December 27, 2017, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html.

environment, ways of addressing poverty and the crises of HIV/AIDS, and the embrace of Africa's cultural diversities as means for embracing a vision of oneness expressed in acts and policies fostering the common good were relevant to a future Magesa dreamed and worked for as a theologian living in the African context.²²

Following Magesa's lead, I now turn to some of the current issues that face the continent of Africa in order to articulate a constructive theology that speaks to contemporary Africa and beyond.

UNDERSTANDING AFRICA'S COLONIAL TRAUMAS

Post-colonial Africa suffers from unresolved traumas from its colonial past. Key aspects of these traumas shape contemporary African societies. These include: fragmentation of the memories of Africa's rich past; complete disregard for life, whether of humans or the environment; an epidemic of corruption and individualism that caricatures any attempt to have an organized society oriented towards the common good; and erasure of people's identities facilitated by religious, tribal, ethnic, and linguistic fundamentalism. It is important to unpack some of these to help shed light on why and how contemporary theologies developed on the continent can help birth forth a new Africa.

To legitimize colonialism, the colonial matrix produces a culture of forgetfulness in its intended victims. It does this by a strategic delegitimization of the cultures, political systems, rituals of knowledge production, religious heritage, and linguistic abilities of the people. It then introduces colonizer cultures, along with their political systems, rituals of knowledge production, religious traditions, and languages into the world of the colonized. To achieve its goals, colonialism employs violence in all its expressions. Africans remember all too well how they were introduced to the Western world through the barrel of the gun along with the subtle use of soft power by agents of the West. By soft power, I mean the introduction of Western ways of life, religious traditions, and even sense of self. Assimilation within a hierarchy of being human is always the intended goal. On the one hand, the colonizer argues for an embrace of their own way of life as a means of attaining civilized existence. On the other hand, they employ a hierarchy of being human that makes the one being assimilated less human in comparison to the one who controls the assimilation process. The entire French assimilation process demonstrates this claim. In 1840, after embarking on a fact-finding mission to Algeria, the French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville argued that Algerians could not be perfectly assimilated into the French world because of their Islamic identity, polygamous

²² Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2004), 209–291.

culture, nomadic way of life, and thus portrayed them as lazy.²³ The same assimilation process created a hierarchy of authentic humanity based on religious affiliation. To be authentically French, one had to be Christian. Religion meant to foster a sense of authentic humanity for all gradually became a source of division and negation of the other.²⁴

The intended goal of colonialism is to effect in the colonized a fragmentation of memory that produces and also legitimizes a form of coloniality of imagination. As Isaiah A. Negedu and I have argued:

Coloniality of imagination operates by creating in the subject an erasure of memories of the past that do not meet the logic of the new realities being experienced by the subject. After all, colonialism has legitimacy by always negating the histories, cultures, social systems, and economies of the people being colonised. The coloniser has a legitimacy in the places traditionally occupied by the colonised only by showing how the colonised is existentially dependent on the benevolence of the coloniser.²⁵

Consequently, the fact that the process of becoming a “civilized” people meant that Africans ought to embrace the European vision of civilization through the coercion of the barrel of the gun and accept the ideology of race that asserted Europeans to be more human than Africans.

The agenda of coloniality of imagination allows for the embrace of another form of coloniality, namely, the coloniality of knowledge. Thus, coloniality of knowledge is intended to erase African consciousness and praxis of knowledge production to allow for that of Europe to claim legitimacy within the African psyche. This form of coloniality never allows for an embrace of complexities or paradoxes. Either you are African or assimilated into the European world. To be African is to be an enemy of the state, religion, language, culture, and economic systems produced for assimilated Africans. In this case, violence is itself a legitimate response towards anyone who insists on being African. This is where it becomes tricky because the systems produced by colonialism are such that they never allow for authentic freedom to be realized. Thus, anyone who wants to embody authentic

²³ Thomas Lacroix, “The Long, Troubled History of Assimilation in France,” *The Conversation*, December 3, 2015, theconversation.com/the-long-troubled-history-of-assimilation-in-france-51530.

²⁴ Lacroix, “The Long, Troubled History of Assimilation in France.”

²⁵ Isaiah A. Negedu and SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai, “African Philosophy Post-1994: In Conversation with Alena Rettová,” *Modern Africa: Politics, History, and Society* 10, no. 2 (2022): 104.

freedom is pushed to the peripheries of society, religion, culture, politics, and even language.

One may be quick to say that Africa now experiences authentic freedom. This is where the grand self-deception plays itself out. No African nation, except Tanzania under the late Julius Nyerere, attempted to address the traumas of colonialism on the African psyche after the end of the formal praxis of colonialism on the continent.²⁶ For other countries in Africa, a false assumption reigns supreme: that the end of formal colonial rule by European powers has ushered in a new era for Africa. They forget that the vestiges of colonial trauma continue to reign supreme on the continent. As a result of the failure of Africans to do the needed work of addressing their collective traumas, through an embrace of coloniality of imagination, some Africans are today perpetuating a culture of violence towards each other. Also, many Africans can only remember the recent past, and when they do, they think that what they remember is truly ancient. Unfortunately, it is not. What they remember is what coloniality of knowledge and the hijacked memories of their people by the colonial matrix has constructed for them. Even this article is itself held captive by linguistic colonialism. Language is the home of coloniality of imagination. To speak the language of the colonizer is to confirm a split in one's psyche. Ngugi wa Thiong'o states this well when he writes:

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interactions in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies.²⁷

Furthermore, language is not just about communication. It is the home of identity construction. It is the home of meaning production. It is the home of community formation. When language is weaponized as a colonial tool for control, its victims will always be a people who replicate violence and all the intended pathologies coded in it by the colonizer. When Africans speak the language of colonizers, they

²⁶ Paul Bjerk, *Building a Peaceful Nation: Julius Nyerere and the Establishment of Sovereignty in Tanzania, 1960–1964* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 97–130.

²⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi, Kenya: James Currey, 1986), 28.

replicate erasures of themselves and project violence towards each other. Suspicion, unhealthy competition, and even a hierarchy of being are legitimized just by the usage of the language of colonizers. Africans look at themselves and define each other's humanity based on their mastery of the colonizers' language. Africans forget that memory is coded in language. Not to speak one's cultural language is to lose one's sense of cultural, religious, political, and economic rootedness. In fact, it is to lose one's sense of self because "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world."²⁸

A sense of self is never complete unless rooted in a rich memory of the past in which one's historicity finds its roots. It is also incomplete unless the imagination is able to wonder into a future that is unfolding. This fact can also be applied to societies and peoples. An African sense of self can correctly be said to be suffering from "anthropological poverty."²⁹ Such a form of poverty limits a people's ability to connect to their rich historical past, whether in the domain of knowledge production, anthropological expressions, language, culture, and even imaginative abilities that need to be rooted in the past, while looking into the unfolding future. This fragmentation of the collective and individual psyche of Africans produces an *anaemia* of a sense of history deeply rooted in the matrix of colonialism. In fact, colonialism produces not just an *anaemia* of memory, but also a form of collective humanity intended to be at the service of the colonizer. It is a collective humanity deeply rooted in the positionality of servitude and self-negation. Such a humanity thinks and speaks of history only from the locus of linearity and is unable to hold in place the complexities defining healthy historicity. At the core of the vision of the human colonialism produced in Africa is the preference of a form of simplicity injurious to the psyche of both individual and community. Such injurious simplicity defined the new reality of nation-states.³⁰ Africa was forced to abandon the rainbow tapestry of political institutions, languages, cultures, ways of thinking and knowledge production, and ways of expressing gender and sexual identities. The colonized African living in the colonial vision of society is meant to embody injurious linearities all the way. To turn to the complex is to become an enemy of the grand agenda created for Africans by the benefactors and perpetrators of colonialism.

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2005), 68.

²⁹ See Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

³⁰ John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 609–610.

Magesa understood the relevance of reclaiming Africa's collective sense of self. Hence, he stressed the importance of reclaiming Africa's spirituality through strategic dialogue with Africa's religious heritage. For Magesa, spirituality is not simply about praying, but also about doing and acting in the world. Hence, he defines African spirituality as an orientation towards harmony, community, and ways of living in a world defined by religious and cultural diversities. If Africa is to embrace peace and harmony among the different ethnic groups that make up the colonial realities called nation-states, a turn to African spiritual consciousness ought to be the norm and way forward.

Courage and insightfulness are virtues Africans need today if they are to articulate a new way of being in the world. Magesa insists on these virtues when he sheds light on how and what evangelization ought to produce in the contemporary African psyche.³¹ Too often, Africans have been conditioned by the colonial matrix producing in them a mentality of subservency. Reception of Christianity or Islam has been reduced to a rejection of Africa's religious and cultural identity markers. To be Christian has been equated to being Westernized. To be a Muslim has been equated to being Arabized. Authentic African Christianity seems to be foreign to many Africans except those who continue to embody the Coptic traditions either in North Africa or in Ethiopia and Eritrea. African Christianity simply means the beating of drums, wearing African clothing, and singing songs written in African languages. However, the psyches of African Christians are still colonized psyches instantiating all things Western. With such considerations in mind, Magesa insists on rethinking mission and identity in contemporary Africa in several of his works, including one titled, *Rethinking Mission: Evangelization in Africa in a New Era*.

The way forward for Africa cannot be left to secular agents alone. Religion has a place in a healthy Africa. Theologians must reclaim their place at the table of reimagining an Africa that is healthy. I now turn to the final part of this article demonstrating how theologians can further Magesa's vision grounded in theological boldness and willingness to be radically imaginative.

GLIMPSES OF HOPE: RECLAIMING A HEALTHY VISION OF CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN AFRICA

Good theology must be grounded in a turn to radical hope. Hope itself is not about wishful thinking or grounded in fantasy. Rather, hope is oriented towards the prophetic, itself ethical. It makes legitimate a vision of the future allowing for authentic progress to be the norm; one that helps mediate the birthing of new life for all.

³¹ Laurenti Magesa, *Rethinking Mission: Evangelization in Africa in a New Era* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba, 2006).

Theology is not about nostalgia for or retrieval of the past only. Rather, it is about linking the past to the present while furthering the present into the many possibilities that open into the future. Too often, theologies have been reduced to apologetics defending insights of the past, or, at best, some theologians see themselves as doctrinal police officers. They are more interested in repeating clearly what has been articulated by others in the past, and which the church eventually embraced as doctrinal guides for responding authentically to the divine-human encounter. They forget that theology is a living discipline that requires the imaginative abilities of the theologian to expand the pathways of encounter with the God who has become a neighbor to creation. The fact that theology ought to speak to and from the context of a people is why there is really nothing like universal theology. All theology is contextual. Thus, since each context is dynamic, theology done in context must itself be dynamic. Magesa understood this principle of contextual theology very well when he wrote from his social location. As an African, he understood the importance of tapping into the memories, metaphors, and cultural heritage of Africa.

Permit me to share an intimate encounter I had with Magesa. In 2013, I was one of the theologians invited to the Jesuit Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya, to reflect on the articulation of pastoral and theological pathways for a healthy church and society in Africa. Magesa and I were both panelists tasked with unpacking the role and place of African women in the Catholic Church in Africa. Being a young theologian just about to defend his doctoral dissertation, I was honored to be at the same table with such a renowned scholar. Magesa tapped into the rich heritage of Africa's matriarchal systems the colonialists intentionally suppressed to replicate Western social systems in Africa as a way of legitimizing their colonial presence and agenda on the continent. After our presentation together, I intentionally forged an intellectual friendship with him. I was lucky. Through his insightful mentorship, I became drawn to taking seriously the intellectual heritage of our African past. Because of his mentorship, I was able to introduce a course in comparative theology focused on the study of African religion in dialogue with African Christianity and African Islam; this course has become one of my favorite courses as I introduce the rich intellectual, cultural, and religious heritage of Africa to my Western students in a predominantly white institution.

The future of theology in Africa must be rooted in an embrace of decolonial imaginations. Africa was intentionally conditioned to reject itself in all its heritages, be they religious, cultural, epistemic, economic, and social. To reclaim what was erased by colonialism and instantiate what is being reclaimed in the present in a manner that allows for a healthy future to be birthed, theology must be done in a

manner that does not follow the logic of the colonizer. Colonial logic is intended to subjugate the psyche of the one who appropriates it. A turn to decolonial imagination is embodied in prophetic witness. It is saturated with creativity. African theology must be rooted in creative thinking. By this, I mean that African theologians ought to do theology outside of the sometimes-toxic understanding of orthodoxy. Orthodoxy does not mean rigid uniformity. Rather, it is grounded in the praxis of synodality, where all parties are involved in the discerning process making sense of the beliefs that instantiate the word of God as living tradition. For God’s word to be a living word, it must be received in a manner that allows for the pruning of its hermeneutic content to help address the context and realities of the community enacting the reception. Let me offer a helpful example. The early church embarked on addressing theological issues of its day, and in doing this, it appropriated the linguistic imaginations of the cultures of its era to help articulate doctrines related to the Trinity. The linguistic imaginations of that era are now outdated. Doing theology relevant for Africa today entails furthering the imaginative process to allow for the usage of concepts, metaphors, and symbols that help Africans see Christian truths as organically rooted in their own respective cultures and linguistic heritages. Latin is not the spoken language of Africa. Western languages can only go so far in giving voice to Africa’s ability to contextualize theological truths. To ensure that the roots are deep, the future of theology on the continent must take seriously Africa’s linguistic imaginations.

The same can be said of liturgical praxis on the continent. Why cannot Africa articulate its own rites and not be dependent on the Roman rite? The Roman rite originated from a particular context, imperial Rome. It speaks to the cultural imaginations of Rome. There is nothing wrong with this fact. But Africa is not Rome and Rome is not Africa. On that note, let me invoke the critical observation of the late Jean-Marc Éla:

Restoration of community bonds with the invisible world is one of the fundamental tasks of that “African Christianity” which Paul VI launched in Kampala. However, good ideas and logical doctrines are no longer sufficient; they must be incorporated into theology, catechesis, and liturgy. The Second Vatican Council opened up the possibility for young churches to explore liturgical and theological pluralism, which allows us to try certain experiments which could be fruitful for all Christianity. Why should the mountain people of northern Cameroon break their *pras* only to see them replaced by Christian relics on altars? If they find that the *pra* is superstition that must be rejected to enter the church, won’t the mountain people make the same judgment about the use of relics? In the mountains, the *pra* of the father is respected; in African churches, the bones of some unknown person, placed on the altar stone, appear to be a kind of

fetish. Since, traditionally, there can be no prayer to the ancestors without the object which represents them, why shouldn't African Christians be permitted to bring the *pra* to a gathering in memory of the ancestors?³²

Éla's question forces contemporary African theologians to take seriously their creative abilities to help retrieve Africa's sacred heritage as the locus of God's encounter with its people. To refuse to engage this question and simply appeal to a rigid understanding of tradition as *semper idem* is to capitulate to the *anaemic* imagination that colonial trauma is intended to produce in the psyches of the colonized. Theology is all about imagination. The work of the theologian is to help the community of believers think clearly about how God is speaking to the community in the here and now. Magesa took Éla's question seriously, hence he insisted on a synodal church that embodies African notions of connectedness. He called for a reform of structures of authority in the church to allow for full participation by all its members.³³ After all, baptism is what constitutes the foundation of ecclesial belonging and discernment.

I want to make a bold statement here by inviting African theologians to take a critical look at the Eucharistic banquet in which African Christians participate. At its core the Eucharist is God's solidarity with creation in the concreteness of its existence. Hence, God who became one with creation took the regular food accessible to the context in which he lived, Judea, and sacralized it as a symbol of God's solidarity with creation. Unfortunately, this basic motif of the Eucharist tends to be forgotten when Christians debate over the matter and substance of what constitutes bread and wine. Wheat and wine are not easily produced in Africa. Each time Africans celebrate the Eucharist in its current form, they instantiate a sense of alienation to their own contexts. Yet, the Eucharistic formula reminds the faithful that the bread and wine are fruits of their labor. What is the labor that African Christians are to offer to God when they bring bread and wine imported from Europe? The work of the theologian is to help the church think outside of the restrictive box that wants to maintain sameness. In Eastern Nigeria for example, the ritual of kola nut breaking has more spiritual significance in the psyches of the people than their eating of the consecrated bread and wine. I argue that if one were to do a sociological study of the Rwandan genocide, one would

³² Éla, *My Faith as an African*, 26–27.

³³ Laurenti Magesa, "Journeying Together in Service and Harmony: The African Jamaa as a Model for a Synodal Church," in *A Pocket Companion to Synodality: Voices from Africa* (Nairobi: African Synodality Initiative, 2022), 70–75, www.jesuits.africa/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ASI-A-Pocket-Companion-to-Synodality.pdf.

conclude that the bond of Christian baptism and the Eucharistic meal could not address the historical hate that existed between Hutus and Tutsis. Perhaps, African theologians ought to help Africans embrace deeply rooted links of sorority that can withstand structures of hate playing out on the continent. How then can the Eucharist be reimagined to make it authentically African? This is the task for the future theology on the continent.

Africa continues to suffer from economic exploitation and political dictatorship carried out by Africans whose interests align with those of Western exploiters. Colonial mentality is all about exploitation through the production of collective individualism. After all, the colonizer's basic interest is to exploit the colonized. Exploitation is by nature rooted in an individualistic mindset. When the victims of colonialism are made to embrace the logic of colonial mentality, they become perpetrators of exploitation unless they do the needed work. Contemporary African theology cannot ignore the work of helping Africans address the culture of corruption and individualism that is a vestige of colonialism playing out on the continent. Jesus Christ initiated an era and the possibility of a new humanity grounded in fellowship and the common good. The early followers of Christ were known for their sense of fellowship because of their ability to transcend the culture of corruption and individualism (Acts 4:32–35). As noted by Éla, the reality that the church in Africa must address today is “to redefine itself in the face of the social problems posed on all levels of African life.”³⁴ Again, he raises pertinent questions that ought to be considered here as well as Magesa's attempt to address them. Éla asks: “How is the church to be the church of Christ in those countries where bloody tyrants celebrate countless murders, exterminating harmless, voiceless populations? How is the church to enter into solidarity with the lowliest, the most disinherited, following in the footsteps of Christ himself, who died on the cross to testify to his love for human beings, his sisters and brothers?”³⁵ In response to these questions, Magesa insisted that the work of the church in Africa is to embody the courage of the vision of the Second Vatican Council. The work of the church in Africa is to continue the work of creative imagination begun by the Council. Thus, African theology must be rooted in an embrace of diverse perspectives and the boldness to think, reflect upon, and challenge what has been accepted to assert its relevance within the context of the continent and its people.³⁶

³⁴ Jean-Marc Éla, *African Cry*, trans. Robert J. Barr (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 7.

³⁵ Éla, *African Cry*, 7.

³⁶ See Laurenti Magesa, *The Post-Conciliar Church in Africa: No Turning Back the Clock* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Bishop Michael Msonganzila of the Diocese of Musoma in Tanzania articulates the life and ministry of Magesa as a theologian in the following words: “Magesa kept asking Africans: And you, Africans, who do you say Jesus is?”³⁷ The role of the theologian is to insist that her audience continue the praxis of discernment to allow for authentic awareness of self and mission in the world. The future of African theology ought to be grounded in a pneumatological turn to the plight of Africans. The continent of Africa, the global Catholic Church, and the world in general are in need of new images and symbols that allow for all to experience abundant life. Structures and systems of erasure must be critiqued for what they are. They must also be abandoned even when they serve the purpose of control. Clericalism is one of those systems. Unhealthy subserviency that continues to define communal life both within and outside the Catholic Church ought to be abandoned. Christianity is a religion of fellowship where all persons are validated, seen, and affirmed for who they are. At its best, it is a religion that transcends narrow visions of judgment while embracing the praxis of suspension of judgment rooted in mercy and compassion. Magesa embodied this way of being Christian. His insistence on being a theologian for all people, whether those who embody the markers of heteronormativity or queerness, the rich or the poor, the educated or the illiterate, and the young or the old is how his legacy will be remembered. Magesa saw his role as a medium of God’s enduring mercy and compassion for all.

The future of theology in Africa in particular, and the global community in general, ought to be conditioned by a way of being and doing things that can birth forth a new world where the sacredness of life is centered in all things. Africa has suffered enough from systems of death. The continent continues to have the lowest life expectancy in the world. The current structures of exploitation continue to inhibit good healthcare for its people. They inhibit the development of systems providing for food and the basic needs of Africans. Theologians cannot ignore these realities if they are to help the Christian faith to flourish on the continent. This is the moment of grace for the church in Africa. Rather than lament these ills, Magesa’s witness calls theologians to embody prophetic witness and be in solidarity with those who have been pushed to the peripheries of church and society. Good theology can help address the endemic poverty playing out in different parts of the continent and our world.

³⁷ Marcel Uwineza, “Laurenti Magesa. An Ancestor of the Church in Africa and the Universal Church,” *Southworld News and Views from Emerging Countries*, October 1, 2022, www.southworld.net/laurenti-magesa-an-ancestor-of-the-church-in-africa-and-the-universal-church/.

Theology done with the mind, heart, and hands will be able to put food on the table. It will be able to insist that the rule of law ought to be the norm in today's world. It will be able to foster a sense of continental and universal sisterhood. If theologians in Africa and beyond embrace this prophetic summon, they will have embraced as well the saturated hope in the new humanity in Christ that defined the life and work of Magesa. **M**

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