A Cry for Freedom: The African Woman's Quest in the Light of the Bible

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Introduction

The place of theology is in the church, however, once the church is in the world and has to respond to contemporary issues, these issues sometimes influence the way people do their theologies'. In spite of these influences on theology and the changes around us; the mission of the church is still the same.[387] Analysis of both the Old and New Testament show a picture of contextualization at various places and seasons. God related to people in the Bible in various contexts and these contexts influenced the content of how they understood God and related to Him. In a similar way, in the African's quest to understand and relate to God in their context, they contextualized their form of theology. This theology is known as 'African Theology' or 'African Liberation theology' depending on the context in which the word is used. Out of it, came African feminist theology or the African womanist theology.

Women are the subject of many questions and controversies in the church today especially African Churches. Is she equal to man? Can she exercise the same spiritual gifts as man in the church? Should she be subject to her husband in all matters? This paper therefore seeks to address some of this issues by bring to light the definition of African

[387] Roger Haight, *The Church as the focus for Theology,* in Why Theology, Claude Geffre and Werner Jeanrond, (eds.), (London: SCM Press, 1994), p.13 - 22

feminist theology, highlight on the African women's view of 'Feminism', give a brief history of African feminist theology and its development, state some of the contexts in which they do their theology, their approaches and the content of their theology. Since Feminist theology is a movement found in several religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, this paper will focus on Christian feminist perspective.

Definition of African feminist theology

The word theology came from two Greek words, *theos* (God) and *logos* meaning word, speech, expression, discourse and etc. Theology is the reflection on God. It is through this reflection that we better know and understand God, as well as how we should relate to Him (God). This comes as a result of our hunger for God and the knowledge of God. According to Stone and Duke, theology is typically expanded to embrace the totality of things having to do with religious life. This includes God and everything associated with faith, Church and ministry.[388] Like every understanding, theological reflection begins by necessity of where we stand.[389] We set from where we are, continuing along the path of faith consciously seeking greater understanding.[390]

Feminist theology is a contemporary form of theology whose focus is to reflect on God from a feminist perspective. That is, they read the Bible with a 'feminist lens'. Their goal include reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language about God, increasing the role of women among the clergy and religious authorities, determining women's place in relation to career and motherhood, and studying images of women in the religion's sacred texts and matriarchal

[388] Stone, W. Howard and Duke, O. James, *How to Think Theologically,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p.3

[389] Stone, W. Howard and Duke, O. James, *How to Think Theologically,* p.38

[390] Ibid. p. 40-41.

religion.[391] African Feminist theologians in this regard do their theology in the context of the African women's experience.

The fundamental emphasis of many African women theologians is inclusiveness.[392] African feminist theology seeks to advance and understand the equality of men and women morally, socially, spiritually, and in leadership from a Christian perspective. According to them, contributions by women in that direction are necessary for a complete understanding of Christianity.[393] They argue that God does not discriminate on the basis of biologically determined characteristics such as sex and race.[394] Their major issues include the ordination of women, male dominance in Christian marriage, recognition of equal spiritual and moral abilities, reproductive rights, and the search for a feminine or gender-transcendent divine. Christian feminists often draw on the teachings of other religions and ideologies in addition to Biblical evidence.[395]

Theology from the African woman's perspective embodied both those in the academia and those who express their theology in the form of spontaneous poetic lyrics, songs and prayers which are an ordinary part of everyday lives.[396] For example, Afua Kuma did her theology

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[391] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_theology [Accessed 23rd August, 2011]

[392] Elizabeth Amoah, *Theology from the Perspective of African Women*, in Women's Vision: Theological Reflection, Celebration and Action, (ed.), Ofelia Ortega, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), p.2.

[393] Harrison, Victoria S., *Modern Women, Traditional Abrahamic Religions and Interpreting Sacred Texts.* Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology Vol. 15, No. 2, (2007), pp.145-159

[394] McPhillips, Kathleen, *Feminisms, Religions, Cultures and Identities*. Australian Feminist Studies, Vol. 14, No. 30, (1999)

[395] Clack, Beverly. Theology and Theology: Mutually Exclusive or Creatively Interdependent? *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* , Vol. 21 (1999), pp.21-38

[396] Elizabeth Amoah, *Theology from the Perspective of African Women*, in Women's Vision: Theological Reflection, Celebration and Action, (ed.), Ofelia Ortega, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), p.1.

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based on the things around her.[397] There are also women theologians in the African Indigenous Churches (AIC) who are also doing their theologies in the form of spontaneous poetic lyrics and songs.

According to Heather W. Reichgott, feminist theologians work in many different arenas of advocacy, while some directly focused on gender issues, others also emphasize on other issues with a feminist critique.[398]

Feminism: African women's view

The term 'feminist' is viewed as problematic in some circles and is not used by all women theologians in Africa. In some places it is stigmatized as something foreign, with skeptics suggesting that sexism is not an issue in Africa, where men and women know their place and play their role ungrudgingly. According to Oduyoye, these sceptics maintain that issues of sexism are supposed to belong to a minority of disgruntled, leisure-saturated, middle class women of the capitalist west.[399] Consequently, in parts of Africa, feminism is often associated negatively with women who have 'difficulty' relating to men. That is difficulty in keeping their marriages intact, through thick and thin.[400] To address this misconception, Oduyoye states, 'Although I am using the word feminism, I am still struggling with the effect it

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[397] Kuma, Afua*, Jesus of the Deep Forest,* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1981, English translation of original Twi texts), p. 17.

[398] Heather W. Reichgott, *What is Feminist theology?,* http://voicesofsophia.wordpress.com/what-is-feminist- theology/ [Accessed 23rd August, 2011].

[399] Oduyoye, Amba Mercy, *Reflections from a Third World Woman's Experience and Liberation Theologies*. In: *The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology: Papers from the Fifth International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, August 17-29, 1981, New Delhi, India.* Fabella, V., and S. Torres. (eds.), (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. 246-255.

[400] Oduyoye Amba Mercy, *Feminist Theology in an African Perspective*. In: *Paths of African Theology.* Gibellini, R. (eds.), (London: SCM Press, 1994), 166-181.

has on African ears'.[401] In search of terminology that would provide for dialogue in Africa, women's theology is preferred to feminist theology. However depending on one's context, if African women-centered women name themselves feminists or womanists it should not be understood as a total imitation of one particular group. Instead it signifies the handicap of the linguistic complexity of the contexts.[402]

Brief history and the development of African feminist theology

Few years after the formation of Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in 1974, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a founding member and other women theologian became concerned about the gender imbalance theology that was going on as at the time. They therefore decided to seek redress in order to project the views of women in the theological arena especially in the African context.[403] In 1988, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), appointed a conveners for women groups in each region of the world. According to Elizabeth Amoah, the African women of EATWOT decided to form a biennial institute for women in religion and culture, an area in which they saw promise for creating a liberative theology that would respond to their needs.[404] In September, 1989, a meeting was held in Ghana at Trinity Theological seminary to form the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians under the initial leadership of Mercy Amba Oduyoye of Ghana succeeded by

[401] Oduyoye, Amba Mercy, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa.(* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), pp. 120 – 122.

[402] Oduyoye, Amba Mercy, *Introducing African Women's Theology*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 124.

[403] Elizabeth Amoah, *Lecture notes*, (Contemporary Women Theology – A course for M.A study of Religions Sandwich programme, June – July, 2010).

[404] Elizabeth Amoah, *Theology from the perspective of African Woman,* in Woman's Vision, Ofelia Orgega, (ed.), (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), pp 5 - 7

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Musumbi Kanyoro of Kenya, and currently Isabel Phiri of Malawi is the helm.[405]

Their aim is to create theological space for African women theologians to find and mentor each other on how to produce theological literature that is based on their experiences. The Circle also uses their communal power to get involved in activism as they work towards the transformation of their communities and institutions for gender justice. Though it began as a Christian organization, circle membership is now made up of African women theologians from African Indigenous Religion (African Traditional Religion), Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism and etc.

In the Ecumenical Review of July 2001, whose theme was 'Transforming Ecumenism in Africa in the 21st Century', a number of articles paid homage to the contribution of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in ecumenical formation in Africa.

Sam Kobia, concluded his article by stating that, 'the initiatives which led to contemporary ecumenical institutions and ethos were strongly male dominated and intrinsically patriarchal. The visions of African women must be allowed to determine not only the structures but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, the content of 21st century ecumenism in Africa. In this vein the insights of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians is absolutely vital. Serious dialogue between the Circle and the ecumenical organizations in Africa is yet to take place'.[406]

Furthermore, Nyambura Njoroge noted that: Inevitably, the significant changes that have taken place in the 20th century in the field of theology, including ecumenical theology, call for a critical

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[405] Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, *African Theology,* in The Modern Theologians. An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918, 3rd Edition, Ford, David and Muers, Rachel, (eds.), (Oxford: Backwell Publishing Ltd), p 486

[406] Sam Kobia, *The Pitfalls of institutional Ecumenism, The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 53, no. 3, July 2001, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), p. 305.

look at how we structure ministerial ecumenical formation. We need to re-examine the theological voices that are emerging; such a move requires the women and men in leadership to be open-minded and discern what these new theological voices have to say to us today ... Hence, even though excluded from church leadership for a long time, African women theologians are making a contribution in the shaping of ecumenical theology.[407]

John Pobee also said, 'Now many publications by women are on the market and ecumenical formation will not be on target unless religious communities come to grips with these voices. If we seek to envision a new church in Africa in which women are more than one-half--and the vibrant, energetic part--then the mission-ecumenism agenda which defines church should seriously engage African women's theology'.[408]

Consideration of these statements was noted by Nyambura Njoroge in his opening address in Ministerial Formation 98/99 - July/October 2002 - double issue, a publication of the World Council of Churches.[409] It could be probably because of this, the World Council of Churches conference which was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, 16-23rd September 2002, embraced African women's theology as part of its ecumenical agenda and subsequently made it a part of its five year action plan of theological education in Africa.[410]

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[407] Nyambura Njoroge, Transforming *Ministerial Ecumenical Formation, The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 53, no. 3, July 2001, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), p. 316.

[408] John S. Pobee, *Ecumenical Formation in the Service of a Renewed Church, The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 53, no. 3, July 2001, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), p. 330.

[409] World Council of Churches, Ministerial formation, 98/99 - July/October 2002 - double issue, Journey of Hope, p.3, http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/education/eef-net/eefnet11.pdf [Accessed 23rd August, 2011].

[410] World Council of Churches, Ministerial formation, 98/99 - July/October 2002 - double issue, Journey of Hope, Pp. 19 – 20, http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/education/eef-net/eefnet11.pdf [Accessed 23rd August, 2011].

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The contexts of African feminist theology

Theology does not exist anywhere without being influenced by a context. Theology is always conditioned by its context or the context of the theologian. According to Pobee, 'Every theology is contextual. There is no neutral theology'.[411] Each Christian theologian has a template and this template operates distinctly. It is this template that helps the theologian to interpret, correlate, and access things in relation to his or her faith and in a particular context. The process of contextualization of theology in this regard becomes necessary when people become dissatisfied with the existing tradition or when they have realized that the existing tradition is not addressing their issues or concerns. They therefore reflect on their situations in the light of Scripture in order to find the best solution that can address their issues. In doing these reflections, theologians are influenced by the context of their experiences, culture, tradition, social or geographical location and social changes.[412]

African feminist theology in the context of experience

Many feminist theologians assert that personal experience can be an important component of insight into the divine, along with the more traditional sources of Scripture or received tradition. According to Bevans, 'All of life and life of faith is a matter of experiencing. This include the experiences of success, failure, births, deaths, relationships and so forth that allowed or prevent people from experiencing God in their lives'. These experiences of life could be

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[411] J.S. Pobee, *Theology, Contextual*, in Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, (Geneva: WCC, 1991), p.985.

[412] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology,* Revised and Expanded Edition, (MaryKnoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), pp. 5 – 6, Richard F. Wilson, *Contextual theology and Global Baptist,* In *Contemporary Gospel Accents: Doing Theology In Africa, Asia, Southeast Asia and Latin America*, Daniel Carro and Richard F. Wilson, (eds.), (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press,1997), pp. 1- 6.

personal or communal.[413] Radford Ruether is also of the view that human experience is the starting point and ending point of the hermeneutical circle. The use of women experience in feminist theology therefore explodes as a critical force for exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on male experience rather than on universal human experience.[414]

The ways in which the life experiences of women in Africa differ is numerous. On a national level, for example, there are cultural, physical, environmental, political and economical variations between nations. The diversity is even much more pronounced on a personal level. However, in general term, feminist theologians take into account their experiences at the work place, church, home and etc. They reflect on issues that undermine the well being and freedom of women to properly function and express themselves as they ought to do as human beings created in the image of God as their male counterparts.[415]

African feminist theology in the context of the Church

In the context of the church, most women serve as Sunday school teachers, church secretaries, custodians, deaconesses and many more who manage and provide for social functions, sing in choirs, and, perhaps most significantly, raise money. The most amazing part is that, there are organized women's associations who raise money for projects concerned with women's needs; but most funds raised are turned over to the leadership of the church, who invariably are men. The number of women serving on administrative boards of many

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[413] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology,* (Revised and Expanded Edition*),* p.5.

[414] Reuther, Radford Rosemary, *Sexism and God talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 12.

[415] Nasimiyu-Wasike, Anne, *Christology African woman's Experience, in Jesus in African Christianity*, J.N.K Mugambi and Laurenti Magasa, (eds.), (Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1989), pp. 123 – 124.

churches in Africa is nothing to write home about. Therefore the voices of women are not heard in decision making.[416]

African feminist theologians are also of the view that, since in the Church in Africa, men and the clergy presume to speak for God, and to demand the obedience of women, it is not easy to experience God as empowering and liberating when one is in the Church's ambit. Women experience God as the one who orders their subordination, who requires them to serve and never be served. God is the one who made them women, with a body deemed to be the locus of sin and impurity. God is experienced as the source of women's oppression and Jesus as the author of the exclusion of women from sacramental roles in the Church. This is the God the Christian tradition wants women to love and obey.[417] In this context, African women reflect on the above mentioned issues in the light of Scripture to see whether it is very true as it appears to be in the context of the Church.

African feminist theology in the context of the society

African feminist theologians also do their theologies by considering the views and the attitude of people towards women. In Africa, women's access to resources, opportunities and education, as well as their access to growth and wealth is severely limited. Rural women are the ones who are mostly faced with an even greater lack of access to resources and prosperity and therefore live under immense poverty. Poverty is a great oppressor of women, as is famine, civil disorder and war. Women and children are the first to starve, and the first to die. In cultures where all material resources are provided by women, they often have all the responsibility for maintaining the social order, but have no right to reap the benefits of that order.

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[416] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflection on Christianity in Africa*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), pp. 124 – 125.

[417] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *The African Experience of God through the eyes of an Akan woman*, http://www.aril.org/african.htm [Accessed 29th August, 2011].

The prevailing cultural and social norms regard women as less valuable members of society, which is not only reflected in the attitudes and behaviours they experience daily, but also within policy-making and legislative structures. Society and culture define women's social role primarily as the caregiver and caretaker and in relation to women's reproductive function, whereas men are regarded as the breadwinners and are defined by their productive role. Alongside this division of responsibilities within social structures goes the prevailing belief that women's contributions to the sustainability of the family are much less valuable than men's.[418]

In the area of education, especially in a typical traditional setting, many African men feel uncomfortable to allow their wives to have a higher educational qualification than them. This is the same with work; men would always want to be doing the better work due to the assumption that if it becomes the other way the woman would not submit to him. In other instances, women are not given educational opportunities due to the presumption that 'the place of women is the kitchen'. Or if anything at all, she would be married to someone and all the investments on their education would be a waste of resources.

All these issues become a point for theological reflection for African Feminist theologians. In their reflections, they think of the best way to help resolve these issues not as a 'gender polities' but from the point of how male and female gender can be seen as both created in the image and likeness of God.

African feminist theology in the context of culture and traditions

Culture is the patterns of behaviour and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create, and share. Culture distinguishes one human group from others. It also distinguishes humans from animals. A people's culture includes their beliefs, rules of behaviour, language,

[418] Johanna Kehler, *Women and Poverty: The South African Experience,* www.bridgew.edu/soas/jiws/fall01/kehler.pdf [Accessed 29th August, 2011].

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rituals, art, technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion, and political and economic systems.[419]

Wilson noted that Niehbuhr's Christ and Culture, has opened the door for continuing discussions about how the gospel and culture in its breadth and depth react to one another. He further stated that in contemporary conversations the focus of attention has shifted to culture as context.[420]

As Male theologians focus on theology and culture in the context of inculturation, their female counterparts are also theologizing from the context of cultural emancipation. African feminist theologians reflect on cultural practices and beliefs that oppress women. They take into consideration proverbs, cultural rites and any cultural factor that marginalize women. Examples are Trokossi practice in some parts of Volta Religion of Ghana, puberty rites, widowhood rites and proverbs.

African feminist theologians are calling for a better option or if possible the elimination of some of the religio-cultural practices. They are asking why is that the Trokossi practice in Volta Ghana affects only innocent virgin women and children and with ill treatment in the name of culture and radition? Why the female mutilation which can affect the health of these young ladies? What about the puberty rites which exposes some sensitive parts of the females to the public? For example their breasts?[421]

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[419] Bodley, John H, *Culture*, Microsoft® Student 2009 [DVD]. (Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008).

[420] Richard F. Wilson, *Contextual theology and Global Baptist*, p. 6.

[421] Elizabeth Amoah, *Lecture notes*, (Contemporary Women Theology – A course for M.A study of Religions Sandwich programme, June – July, 2010) and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy,* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 157 – 171.

African feminist theology in the context of the Scripture

In African churches, it rare to hear about what the Bible says about women. African churches with their many variations, have not produced a body official dogmatics hewn from the African context; however, they have developed a theology of folk talk on what God requires of women. Instead of promoting a new style of life appropriate to a people who are living with God 'who has made all things new', the church in Africa continues to use the Hebrew Scripture and the Epistles of Saint Paul to reinforce the norms of traditions and culture.[422] For example, 'women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church'. (1 Corinthians 14: 34 - 35) You would also hear, 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord'. Many of the preachers lay much emphasis on the submission of women to men than the other side, 'So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loves his wife loves himself'. (Ephesians 5: 22, 28) Furthermore, many Biblical pronouncements that have direct parallel to African traditional corpus of proverbs, such as those that deal with relations to family, are mostly cited by men to reinforce African culture and traditional views that undermine women.[423]

This and other undermining women issues in the Bible also become points for theological reflection for feminist theologians, especially African feminist theologians. They are therefore calling for holistic Biblical hermeneutics.

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[422] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy,* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 174

[423] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands : Reflection of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), pp. 91 – 92.

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Approaches of African feminist theologians

In seeking for redress for the context of oppressions and suppressions African women are going through, they began articulating for the need for liberation from the sexist oppression which occurs not only in the church but also in the social, political and economic spheres. In the view of this, African feminist theologies take its point of departure by the acceptance of the equal human worth of all in a just society. According to Heather W. Reichgott, Feminist theology and praxis have always gone together.[424] The praxis model of theology is a theology that is formed by knowledge at its most intense level. This is the level of reflective action. It is also about discerning the meaning and contribution to the course of social change, and so it takes inspiration from neither classic texts nor classic behavior but from present realities and future possibilities. The praxis model gives ample room for expressions of personal and communal experience.[425]

Grenz and Olson in their review of feminist theology state that their approach was developed in three distinct steps. They begin with a critique of the past such that they review the ways women have been oppressed; they seek alternative Biblical and extra Biblical traditions that support the ideals Feminists are trying to advance; and finally feminists set forth their own unique method of theology, which includes the revisioning of Christian categories.[426] In a similar view, Elizabeth Amoah noted that feminist theologians start their approach by analyzing their experiences as women, deconstructing the existing system by questioning and critiquing them with a feminist lens and consequently reconstructing the existing system to suit their lives by searching for new model or having a paradigm shift.

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[424] http://voicesofsophia.wordpress.com/what-is-feminist-theology/ [Accessed 23rd August, 2011].

[425] Bevans, Stephen B., *Models of Contextual Theology,* Revised and Expanded Edition, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 70

[426] Grenz, Stanley J. and Roger E. Olson. *20th Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age,* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 227.

Teresa Okure, noting the central place of the Bible, states that African women's approach to Biblical interpretation would be best described as 'doing theology from women's perspective'. She presents her understanding of the methodology adopted by African women in their feminist interpretations of the Bible, and notes that African women interpret along these lines. First, they identify a woman's situation in African culture and society, describe it and critically analyse it, then look at the gospel to see how Jesus handled such situations by using other socio-cultural sources in combination with the Bible. Second, they adopt the predominantly theological works like reading a particular portion of the Bible. Thirdly, they use the experience of women in the church and then look to the gospel for more insight.[427]

African feminist theologians consequently put their outcome into writing books, articles, book chapters, and organizing seminars for women empowerment and dialogue.[428] These approaches are geared towards the liberation and transformation of women in whatever unfavourable context they are. Bevans noted that this is the only way men and women can fulfill their call as genuine children of God.[429] The 1983 World council of Churches assembly in Vancouver also suggested that whatever theological approach one takes, it should be done holistically.[430] Pobee is also of the view that feminist issues need to be seen in the context of the community of women and men.[431] In this regard, Mercy Amba Oduyoye stated that African feminist theologians have been critical of the dualistic and hierarchical modes of conceiving and organizing the human community and of its various levels of interaction. They have emphasized the necessity of giving

[427] Okure, Teresa, *Feminist Interpretations in Africa*. In: *Searching the Scriptures*, Schussler Fiorenza, E., (eds.), (London: SCM Press, 1993), pp. 76- 85.

[428] Elizabeth Amoah, *Lecture notes*, (Contemporary Women Theology – A course for M.A study of Religions

[429] Bevans, Stephen B., *Models of Contextual Theology,* Revised and Expanded Edition, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 73.

[430] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands : Reflection of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 42.

[431] Pobee, John S., *Culture, Women and Theology,* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), p.1

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mutuality and partnership a chance, not just in man – woman relationships but in all human enterprises.[432] Liberation must therefore be seen as a men and women walking together on the journey home, with the church as the umbrella of faith, hope and love.[433]

Content of African feminist theology

The word content used here is to bring our minds to what theology should be made up of. That is what constitutes theology? Since theology cannot be done in a vacuum, there are few things that should be considered when one decides to do theology. Some notable content of African feminist theologies are as follow;

God

Theology is all about God and His message. The basic definition of theology which was taken from two Greek words, *theos,* meaning God, and *logos*, meaning word, speech, expression and discourse, supports this fact. It is therefore impossible for one to come and explain God without experiencing or having no knowledge about God.

African feminist theologians in this regard, begin their theological reflection with God as the first point of contact. They see God from a genderless perspective. They see God as a loving and caring One who does support the oppression of anyone (Exodus 3: 7 – 9). His love is genderless that is why the Bible says, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). They also take into account the fact that both men and female were created in the image and the likeness of God. Taking inspiration from Scripture, they say, 'There is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in

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[432] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflection on Christianity in Africa*, (Accra, Ghana: Sam-wood Ltd, 2000), p. 136.

[433] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy,* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 185

Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by Him' (1 Corinthians 8: 6). 'There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all' (Ephesians 4: 4 – 6).

Jesus Christ

Due to the oppressed situations African women are living in, and also in other form similar to that of the time of Jesus Christ, the content of their theology is based on how to liberate women from all forms to oppression. They have therefore linked their theology to Jesus Christ as the liberator of the oppressed and the marginalized (Luke 4: 18 – 19). African women find empowerment through their identification with the Christ who has taken on their condition of

weakness, misery, injustice, and oppression, and identify Jesus not only as the crucified one, but

also as mother, nurturer, liberator, conqueror over evil, and healer who restores health and life to individuals and communities.[434]

African feminist theologians also take into account the role Jesus played in relation to the liberation of women. They are of the view that Jesus raised the window for women. He paid attention to them. His manner was inclusive and acknowledged their place in the kingdom He proclaimed. By what He did and what He said He elevated the status of woman.

In addition to the above, Jesus was able to retain the best in the Hebrew tradition and yet cut away some of the rigid structures that restricted it. He was able to do the same for women. Without radically changing their roles, Jesus enlarged and transformed women's

[434] Teresa M. Hinga, *Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa*, in The Will to Arise: Woman, Tradition and the Church in Africa, Oduyoye, Amba Mercy and Kanyoro, Musimbi R. A., (eds.), (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992), pp.183-1 94.

possibilities for a full life. His manner and teachings elevated her status and gave her an identity and a cause. Jesus' manner in His interactions with women is at least as significant as His teachings about woman. At the risk of censure from a male-oriented society, Jesus talked to women, responded to their touch, healed them, received their emotional and financial support, and used them as main characters in His stories. Jesus saw women as persons. Martha wanted Jesus to make Mary help with the serving duties, but Jesus affirmed Mary's choice to learn as a disciple. Women of that day could not be disciples of rabbis, but Jesus recognized women's potential for intelligent thought and commitment (Luke 10:38-42).[435]

Scripture

African feminist theologians read the Bible with 'feminist lens' considering the fact that the Bible was written in the context of certain culture and traditions that were fully patriarchal in nature which could influence the approaches of the authors.[436] They therefore see everything in God's original plan which was genderless. They are of the view that God used 'they and them' for the assignment He gave to both Adam and Eve which shows uniformity and partnership in role (Genesis 1: 27 – 29).[437]

They also argue on the fact that even in the Old Testament where the patriarchal was very strong, the daughters of Zelophehad, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, fought for their right for inheritance and succession of their father and it was granted them by God. (Numbers 27: 1- 8) Also in the heat of all the cultural and social challenges against women, God raised people like Debora the wife of

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[435] Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, *Christology African woman's Experience, in Jesus in African Christianity*, J.N.K Mugambi and Laurenti Magasa, (eds.), (Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1989), pp. 126 – 130.

[436] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy,* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 191.

[437] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflection on Christianity in Africa*, (Accra, Ghana: Sam-wood Ltd, 2000), p. 136.

Lappidoth to lead Israel (Judges 4: 4 – 5) In a similar way God used Esther to deliver the Jewish race from genocide. (Esther 4 – 6).

In the New Testament, they reflect on the wonderful role played by Mary through her immaculate conception that led to the salvation of Mankind from sins and condemnation. They also argue from the point of the role played by Mary Magdalene, the first woman who was bold to visit the tomb of Jesus Christ even while it was clearly noted that the Roman soldiers were guarding the tomb. She was also the first person to see the resurrected Christ and was subsequently sent to inform the rest of the disciples (Mark 16:9 - 10; John 20:1-18). Feminist theologians also proceed to the era of the early church, pointing to the fact that women were named among those who were in the upper room to pray which also meant that they were part of those who received the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost Day (Acts 1: 12 – 14, 2: 1 – 4) One Scripture verse that appeal to them most is Paul's statement, 'for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3: 27 – 28).

As stated by the German theologian Gerhard Ebeing that the collection of the writings which Christians call the Holy Bible is an integral element in the life of the church, and Christian theology and text of the Bible is the means through which believer a seeks to hear a message from God,[438] Mercy Oduyoye asserts that, 'African feminist theologians reread the Bible to seek guidance on how to listen to God and to recognize where God is at work in our world today'.[439]

Conclusion

Analysis of the arguments presented shows that the African feminist theologians proposing that Theology or bible interpretation should not

[438] Stone, W. Howard and Duke, O. James, *How to Think Theologically*, p.44.

[439] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy,* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 191

be one hand affair. It should be done holistically as Christians turn to the Bible for guidance in responding to issues concerning humanity. Though the Old Testament clearly subjected woman to the will and protection of her husband, she was extolled for performing her important roles as wife and mother. On some occasions she rose above those roles and led the Jewish nation in times of crisis. This should help us understand the context in which the Bible was written and therefore should not become the bases for undermining women in our society. The New Testament on the other hand, brought a different picture of women. Jesus, as part of His work of liberation, elevated the status of women so that they could be a full participant in the kingdom of God. However, they are urged to use their responsibility as well as their freedom to find a place in the body of Christ. The spirit of freedom and love in Christ is women's as well as men's. In view of this, Churches in Africa need to empower women not only to speak for themselves and manage their women's affairs but to be fully present in decisions and operations that affects the church, including forming of its theology. Only then would the church become a home for both men and women.

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