

Regional Theological Associations and Theological Curriculum Development in East Africa: Challenges and Prospects

Philomena Njeri Mwaura

Abstract

Ever since the 1970s, regional theological associations like the Association of Theological Institutions of Eastern Africa, Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians and Ecumenical Symposium of East African Theologians have been instrumental in influencing the development and implementation of theological education curriculum either directly or indirectly. They have contributed through research, writing and pedagogy in the evolvement of relevant and contextual theologies. In the last ten years however, with the conversion of former theological colleges into universities with accreditation status, the accrediting and examining roles of associations like ATIEA has become moribund. Lack of funding has also negatively impacted on the associations. This article explores this development and suggests ways in which the associations can continue to function as trend setters in theological education in a changed environment.

Key Words: Theological education, theological curriculum, theological associations, Ecumenical cooperation.

Introduction

This article explores the role of regional theological associations in East Africa in influencing the development and implementation of Theological education curricula and the challenges they have experienced since the 1990s. It is a well known fact that since the establishment of Christianity in Africa, theological education and ministerial formation at varying degrees were rooted in the missionary task. Theological education provided in educational colleges fostered interdenominational co-operation and contributed to the formation of professional theological associations like Association of Theological Institutions of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and Ecumenical Symposium of East African Theologians (ESEAT), among others.¹

Among other functions, these associations developed literature for theological education and were instrumental in curriculum development, monitoring and evaluation. Though still existent, these associations appear somewhat peripheral to theological education in theological schools and departments of religion and theology in public and private church based universities. The question arises, what has contributed to the marginalization of theological associations in East Africa in theological curriculum development? Are they still relevant or have their functions changed?

Philomena Njeri Mwaura (Ph.D) is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Kenyatta University Nairobi Kenya. Her email address is philomwaura@yahoo.com.

¹ Other associations include the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians which was formed in 1989 to promote theological research and reflection from African women's perspectives and experiences. The Circle, through its members who are spread out in Universities and theological institutions all over Africa has contributed to engendering theological curriculum in content and pedagogy.

Drawing examples from the experiences of ESEAT, EATWOT and ATIEA in East Africa, this ARTICLE evaluates the challenges faced by these associations today in shaping theological developments. It also examines the prospects they have for influencing theological curriculum to be relevant and reflect the needs of the African society of Justice, Peace, reconciliation, governance, health, gender justice, environmental justice and a meaningful spirituality.

The article begins with a brief description of these associations and then proceeds to evaluate their contribution to theological education and the challenges they experience. It concludes by assessing their potential for influencing theological education curriculum development and the development of a holistic, relevant and contextual African Christian Theology. The data for this article is derived from anecdotal evidence from persons serving in the leadership of some of the associations and my own experience as a member of some of the associations.²

Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa (ATIEA)

The Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa was founded in January 1960 following several conferences in the 1950s by tutors of theological colleges in the region who felt the need for co-operation and consultation on matters of common concern. Its formation was also linked to the establishment of the Theological Education Fund in 1968 which was set up following the International Missionary Council meeting in Ghana (Welch 1963:57-59). The founder members of the association were: Bishop Tucker Memorial College, Mukono, Uganda (Uganda Christian University, today), Bulawasi College, Mbale, Uganda, Lutheran Theological College, Makumira, Tanzania (Makumira University, today), St. Philip's College, Kongwa, Tanzania, St. Cyprian's College, Ngala, Tanzania, St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru, Kenya (St. Paul's University today)

The purpose of the association was to:

- i) Promote true Christian fellowship, understanding and co-operation between various theological institutions engaged in training Christian ministers in East Africa.
- ii) Foster the study of theology and related subjects.
- iii) Improve the standards and methods of education for Christian ministry in East Africa.
- iv) Provide a forum for discussion and exchange of information of common interest and a means for coordinated action whenever this is deemed desirable within the scope of the association (ATIEA, 1985: 1).

² I am currently the coordinator of the Theology Commission of EATWOT, Africa region and previously served as the coordinator EATWOT Women's Commission, Africa region from 1997-2006; and chairperson of EATWOT, Kenya chapter from 1998-2003. I am also a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

The association was initially supported with a major grant by the Theological Education fund of 38,000 British pounds for various projects all concerned with the establishment of the course leading to the East African Diploma in Theology. The grant helped to provide libraries and books, tutors' housing, a tutor for the Makerere College Department of Religious Studies and a fulltime Registrar for the Diploma course, who was to be at the same time secretary of the association (Welch;57). The sponsoring churches were also requested by the TEF to develop the infrastructure of the colleges receiving the grant. The support from the TEF started a process of training qualified, ministers who were to continue the churches witness to society in the post independence era. Other theological colleges that did not receive the TEF grants are said to have been encouraged to carry out development programmes for theological training (Welch: 58).

By the end of 1961, two other colleges applied for membership, the Baptist Seminary of East Africa, Arusha, Tanzania and the Mennonite Theological College, Musoma, Tanzania. With time other colleges followed suit namely, Mekane Yesus Seminary, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Kima Theological College, Kenya Bishop Gwynne Theological College, Juba, Sudan, Katigondo National Seminary, Uganda, St. Mark's Theological College, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania and the United Church of Zambia. Departments of Religious Studies of Makerere University, Uganda, Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi Kenya also became members.

In 1961, the association initiated a three year Diploma course in Theology which was supervised and examined officially under the auspices of Makerere University, Uganda. The Diploma course was taken by theology students of both Catholic and Protestant³ member institutions. After several consultations, a Bachelors of Divinity Degree programme was started in 1978. ATIEA was subsequently registered as a degree and diploma awarding body stationed in Nairobi. It continued to play this role until 1993 when member institutions became independent and sought accreditation and began to offer their own programmes. ATIEA's relevance to these institutions became diminished. For the last 10 years, it has become moribund and even the funding it used to get from the TEF, according to the current General Secretary, Godfrey Ngumi also dwindled (Oral Interview :15th June 2009).

During it's hey days, ATIEA promoted closer ecumenical relationships with the churches for whom it trained ministers. It used to gather tutors from member institutions for biennial conferences where not only business matters were discussed, but academic papers were presented, discussed and published on pertinent themes. Students from member theological colleges were sponsored to the conferences for academic exposure and mentoring. Publications from ATIEA include F.G. Welch, *Training for the Ministry in East Africa*, (1963) P. M. Miller, *Equipping for Ministry* (1969) and D. W. Waruta (ed.) *Caring and Sharing: Pastoral Counseling in the African Perspective*.

³ The offices of ATIEA were housed in the Ufungamano House, a building owned jointly by the Catholic and Protestant churches.

ATIEA's Successes

ATIEA set the trend and standards for theological education in Eastern Africa. It inherited a curriculum in the 1960's that did not meet the needs of newly independent states and a growing church that was required to give spiritual guidance to the Christian community, inculcate Christian ethical teaching and respond to human needs of education, healthcare, material wellbeing, challenges of a rapidly urbanizing context and a relevant theological education.

Although theological institutes have been accused of conservatism in their curriculum, rigidity and being patterned on western models, ATIEA did attempt to design a curriculum that reflected the East African context. It may not have been radical in its approach, but it made an effort. As Ngumi (Oral Interview: 16th June 2009) observes,, the liberation theology of the 1960s and 1970s influenced curriculum design. The calls for a contextual/ inculturated Christianity led to the incorporation of courses that did not previously feature in the theological curriculum. Thus by the 1980s' the following courses were included in the Bachelor of Divinity curriculum.

- Introduction to African Traditional Religion and Islam.
- Christianity in modern Africa.
- Theology in the African context.
- Christian ethics in an African context.
- History of the Church in one's own country.
- The African church fathers.
- Christian Approaches to Modern Ideologies and Development Programmes in Africa.

The methodologies of teaching were supposed to have Africa as a reference point. However, it is reported that in most theological institutions, tutors remained foreign⁴ and the approach in teaching was still western, Euro-American centric. For example, courses on world Christianity still focused on Western Europe while no courses were mounted on Christianity in the Middle-East, Eastern Europe, Latin America, North America, Asia and Eastern Christianity. Africa was also taught selectively according to regions and therefore it was not taught as a whole.⁵ Contemporary issues like gender justice, ecological justice,

⁴ Some of the tutors were seconded to the institutions by mission partners supporting the institutions. For example, St. Paul's United Theological College Limuru was until the late 1990s mostly staffed by foreign missionaries despite the fact that by 1972, it had an African Principal.

⁵ I have been teaching in Church based institutions since the early 1990s and has observed the dynamic changes in curriculum development. Some of the courses I teach include, World Christianity, The Church in Africa and New Religious Movements in Africa. However, I still encounter students who claim that some of the institutions that trained them for ministry did not offer a comprehensive course or approach on the Church in Africa or even teach in a manner that showed the link between Africa and the rest of Christendom

conflict, peace and reconciliation, theology and development, and HIV/AIDS were not adequately covered or never taught.⁶

Although ATIEA succeeded in initiating changes in curriculum content, more still remained to be done for curriculum review is an ongoing process that should ideally be done every five years.

The Ecumenical Symposium of Eastern African Theologians (ESEAT)

ESEAT was formed in 1989 through the initiative of Fr. Carol Houle a Maryknoll Missionary from USA who was convinced of the need to promote contextual theology in East Africa. He contacted Prof. Jesse Mugambi of the University of Nairobi who subsequently formed a nucleus of senior theologians in East Africa most of whom were based in Nairobi. These included: Benezet Bujo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo(DRC) and John Mary Waliggo of Uganda both of whom were teaching at the Catholic Higher Institute of Eastern Africa (now Catholic University of Eastern Africa). Others included Douglas Waruta and Hannah Kinoti of the University of Nairobi and Anne Nasimiyu Wasike of Kenyatta University.

The association in the words of Mugambi(2005:19) aimed at “...cultivating an ecumenical profile in which scholars from all brands of Christianity would be accommodated and their diverse theological perspectives would interact and challenge each other...African Christian theology ought to be an ecumenical and Pan-African endeavour, rather than a denominational, sectarian and parochial one.”

Theologians involved in the initiative were therefore drawn from Catholic and Protestant traditions, ordained and lay men and women. They met every year a week before Palm Sunday a process that has continued to this day. Participating scholars had to have a Ph.D or be in the process of completing a one. The reason was that the project was supposed to be post-doctoral, “providing a forum for accomplished theologians to polish their research skills while providing contextualized textbooks for use within Africa and abroad”(Mugambi:20).

Another criterion was that invited scholars (also from the rest of Africa) were to be prolific in research and ecumenically minded, willing to work as a team and committed to open learning that could deepen faith and extend their research horizons(ibid:20). Prof. Mugambi chaired the association for a number of years and Fr. Carole Houle served as secretary and provided the necessary liaison. Maryknoll provided the initial funding. The leadership continues to change and the association is today self-financing especially through royalties from its publications, currently published by Paulines Publications in Nairobi.

⁶ Even today, some institutions have not revised their theological curriculum since the 1990s some of the obstacles being bureaucracy in the institutions. The curriculum therefore remains to some extent irrelevant.

The book projects initially focused on the perennial themes which comprise the basic curriculum in the training of priests, pastors and other religious personnel. These include Christology, Ecclesiology, Missiology, Moral Theology, Pastoral Theology, Biblical Theology and Liturgy. In their writings, scholars were expected to include both conventional research and its application within a particular church or social context in contemporary Africa. From 1995, other ways of doing contextual theology were explored and the approach shifted to beginning with contemporary social challenges and reflection on them theologically. Consequently, subsequent volumes focused on the problem of violence, democracy and reconciliation, poverty, challenges of the church in the 21st century, religion and health, religion and politics, urban ministry and ethnicity. A publication focusing on theological method has also been done.

The publications have circulated throughout Africa and to many institutions in Europe and North America. Several M.A. and doctoral thesis have been written on them (ibid). They have provided relevant and contemporary resources on African theology in Eastern Africa to theological institutions and departments of Religious Studies in universities. Their highlighting contemporary issues in African Christian theology have indirectly influenced theological curriculum and teaching methodologies because the scholars involved plough back the experience gained and expertise into their teaching. Some of the scholars are also heads of departments, academic deans or principals of their institutions and therefore key to any curriculum review or change. The expertise of some is sought in curriculum design for new institutions or the review of programmes submitted to the Kenya Commission for Higher Education.

The capacities of these scholars have been built through the communal development of theology that they are engaged in.

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT)

EATWOT is an association of theologians from the global south namely Africa, Asia, Latin America and minority groups from the USA. Its existence dates back to the 1970s when African students studying in Louvain, Belgium under the leadership of Oscar Bimwenyi of DRC expressed a desire to promote a theology that addressed the actual living contexts of the people of the two thirds worlds. These students later made contacts with others in Latin America (Okure1995:48)

EATWOT was finally inaugurated in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 1976. The association aimed at promoting dialogue, fellowship and solidarity among members across continents regardless of class, gender, race and denominational boundaries. Secondly, it sought to develop the theologies that would be rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ in a more meaningful way to the people of the two third worlds and promote their struggle for liberation. The theology would also take into account the life situation in the two third worlds. It also sought to achieve true and full humanity for all in Christ through making a serious analysis of the social, cultural, political and economic context of these people.

Finally EATWOT endeavored to contribute to the overcoming of structures of dominance and injustice which keep, create and perpetuate gaps between the rich and the poor among and within nations, through its method of theologizing. This method begins with situation analysis of life and action at the grassroots with the people, reflection in the light of the Bible and Social Teachings of the Church that leads to action i.e. praxis and transformation. EATWOT also struggles against sexism through the Women's Commission.

The process of doing theology has led to the development of theological literature that has been used in theological institutions in the two third worlds. Membership to EATWOT is open to those with at least a Master's degree in theology or religious studies. The idea is to promote research and writing hence the need to have those who are research active or are skilled in research.

Since 1993, a Kenya chapter of EATWOT was founded under the leadership of Mary Getui who was succeeded in 1998 by Philomena Mwaura. EATWOT Kenya chapter adopted the objectives of the international association and engaged in a process of doing communal theology by reflecting theologically on pertinent issues affecting the African continent. Some of the issues addressed include, gender based violence, globalization, interfaith dialogue, poverty, conflicts and peace building. Three books have been published since then, *Theology of Reconstruction Exploratory Essays*, (1999), *Quests for Abundant Life in Africa* (2001), *Quest for Integrity in Africa* (2004) all published by Acton Publishers in Nairobi. Three more are underway including one on leadership.

The association has been self-financing through members' contributions and royalties from the publications. Conferences have been held annually on themes generated by the members and deemed relevant to the African /Kenyan context. The publications are also used in teaching in the theological institutions and departments of Religious Studies in universities. EATWOT has therefore also indirectly influenced theological education through capacity building of its members, developing of contextual communal theology and providing resources to support the theological curricula.

What are the challenges that the three associations have faced in curriculum development and shaping theological education in East Africa? It is to this that we shall now turn.

Challenges in Influencing Theological Education

The first major problem that ATIEA and ESEAT have faced is funding. Both have relied on funding especially from organizations in Europe and America (Maryknoll, WCC, EMW of Germany, etc). The financial crunch experienced by these sponsoring organizations has led to diminishing of funds or lack of total support. This has affected planning for future conferences and activities. Member institutions of ATIEA have also not been remitting their contributions to the association (Ngumi Oral Interview: June 2009). Secondly, the conversion of some theological institutions into universities (e.g. St. Paul's University, Makumira University and Uganda Christian University) and establishment of denominational universities with accreditation as examining bodies has

diminished the role of ATIEA. There were also problems of coordination at the ATIEA secretariat in Nairobi that led to member institutions losing faith in it. Theological education has subsequently become denominationally driven and there is little if any ecumenical co-operation, except that the institutions are open to all regardless of nationality or creed.

Fourthly, there is unhealthy competition, duplication of courses and watering down of standards as all institutions public and private spread their nets wide to capture the growing number of students hungry for theological and secular education. There seems not to exist a strong mechanism to monitor or evaluate quality and relevance of content and mode of delivery.

Fifthly, another challenge is availability of qualified staff to teach in all the institutions and to supervise graduate students. Most institutions rely on part-time lecturers who are also overworked in their mother institutions. This therefore affects the capacity of these lecturers to engage in research and publishing.

A sixth challenge is leadership. While previous founding leadership were committed and dedicated to the process of developing contextual theology, later leadership do not seem to share in the founding vision. There has therefore been apathy and failure to mobilize and nurture the younger generation who can continue the vision. Some of the current leadership is also too busy and others have joined administration or moved out of the academic institutions. EATWOT and ATIEA have especially experience these challenges.

Kenya has been active in these associations and in most cases steered the leadership. The Ugandans and Tanzanians have not been so involved. Challenges of communication and financing travel and other expenses have hindered their effective participation. However, ESEAT has a sizeable participation from Ugandans. The Tanzanians also launched their own local theological association and have held annual meetings since 2000 and published three volumes.⁷

A final challenge is access to the literature produced. Since theologians are not publishers and book distributors, marketing the books has been challenging. Distribution of the books has not been very efficient and sometimes our students are not able to buy them even when available due to lack of finances. There is also no guarantee that church leaders and those involved in policy decisions in the churches are reading what we write. There is therefore a disconnect between the academy and mission practitioners. Are church leaders uncomfortable with the liberating approach to theology and some of the issues addressed for example, gender justice, women's empowerment and option for the poor? Are they uncomfortable with the empowerment of the people of God?

⁷ One of the books is, *Charismatic Renewal in Africa: Challenge to African Christianity*, Mika Vahakangas and Andrew A. Kyomo (eds.) Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003.

Lessons learnt and Prospects

Our experience in the theological associations since the 1970s has confirmed that there is great need for contextually relevant and affordable theological textbooks in Africa. Christian bookshops throughout the continent are stacked with books from Europe and North America. If it is true that Christianity is dynamic and growing in the continent, where is the evidence of that dynamism and growth in African theological literature? For many years African scholars have observed that the Church in Africa is growing numerically but not theologically. Kwame Bediako (1998: 52; 2008:110) has remarked that Africa can only provide the representative Christianity in the world if it engages in production of theology. Orobator (2009:34) also observes that African theology has yet to attain an organic unity or preserve or produce a comprehensive synthesis. It is still provincial.

It is obvious that numerical growth will not be significant unless it is matched by theological growth. Theological maturity as Mugambi (2005: 28) observes, “is manifested in the documented reflections of particular communities of faith. Despite its weaknesses, the medieval church produced theologians whose contributions are still cherished in the history of Christianity”. What legacy will African Christianity bequeath to posterity?

Theological associations can continue to this role but they should be committed to research, and publication, attendance of meetings/conferences and to read beyond the discipline of theology. It has to be willing to engage insights from other disciplines in its methods, procedures and categories of description, analysis and interpretation. I agree with Bediako (2008:10), that “our theology has to be done in a way that it touches the African most deeply”. Secondly, for African theologians and the associations to influence theological curriculum they have a responsibility to write and publish textbooks of the courses they teach and ensure that they are on the course outlines. We have a sad situation in most of our institutions in which we use books written in other cultural contexts and intended for use in those other cultural contexts. We cannot nurture research and writing skills in our students if we do not lead them by example. We cannot also continue to complain about cultural alienation and academic irrelevance when we are actually part of the problem. We should provide solutions. Neither should we continue to reiterate in our writings and recommend the ‘mantra’, “The church should for “we are the church”.

Thirdly we should explore ways of producing sustainable journals and create networks and collaboration with other institutions and associations within the countries in Africa that are more organized. We should collaborate with the South African theological, missiological and other associations that have a track record of sustained research and publications. The Joint Conference was an eye opener to those of us from the rest of the African continent and we hope for continued co-operation, co-research and co-publishing. We need to interact with scholars from other regions in Africa. This need not be expensive for we can “take advantage of visiting scholars by inviting them to our

institutions, during transit stops which tend to be numerous in African airline routes” (Mugambi: 29).

Fourthly, it is our responsibility as African scholars and our institutions to support theological associations. With commitment, ingenuity and creativity we can solicit some funding from our own sources. EATWOT Kenya has shown that members can self finance publications and distribute the books. They can also finance their own transport and accommodation to local conferences. The associations need to explore how they can develop a framework and mechanisms that will enable them contribute to theological curriculum development including monitoring and evaluation. They can play the role of alerting institutions about emerging issues that require to be factored into the curriculum, new methodologies and new trends. They can also contribute in building capacity of clergy and institutions.

Finally ATIEA can also reinvent itself by transforming its functions and mode of delivering courses to take advantage of technology to promote E-theological Education. Its role as a degree awarding institution has not been revoked and there is a large market of lay men and women and clergy yearning for theological education especially at a higher level. This is a mode that would be relevant and cost effective.

References

- ATIEA. 1985. *Association of Theological Institutions of Eastern Africa Handbook 1984-1985*, Nairobi.
- Bediako, K. 2008. ‘Whose Religion is Christianity?’ Reflections on Opportunities and Challenges in Christian Theological Scholarship: The African Dimension, in *Mission in the 21st Century, Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, edited by A. Wall and C. Ross. London: Dalton. Longman & Todd: 107-117.
- Bediako, K. 1998. Facing the Challenge: Africa in World Christianity in the 21st Century, A Vision of the African Christian Future, *Journal of African Christian Thought* 8(1).
- Getui, M. and Obeng, E.A. (eds.).1999. *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers.
- Getui, M and Theuri,M. (eds.). 2001. *Quests for Abundant Life in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers.
- Mugambi, J.N.K. 2005. Ecumenical Contextual Theological Reflection in Eastern Africa 1989-1999, in *Challenges and Prospects of the Church in Africa: Theological Reflections in the 21st Century*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers: 17-29.
- Okure, T. 1995. Reading from this place: Some Problems and Prospects, in *Reading from this place*, by F.F.Segovio and M.A.Tolbert (eds.), Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Orobator, E. A.2009. The Sky is wide enough: A Historico-Critical Appraisal of Theological Activity and Method in Africa, in *Hekima Review*, 40: 34-44.
- Theuri, M. and Wamue, G. (eds.). 2004. *Quests for Integrity in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers.
- Waruta, D.W. (ed.) 1995. *Caring and Sharing: Pastoral Counseling in the African Perspective*, Nairobi: ATIEA.

Welch, F.G. 1963. *Training for Ministry in Eastern Africa*, Limuru: Association of E.A. Theological colleges.