

## Foreword

ROBERT HEANEY WAS UNIQUE among my graduate students. During his doctorate he took time out to teach at St. John's University, in Dodoma in Tanzania. His experience of African theology, therefore, is not primarily from books but from his students, their struggles to find the resources to do their study and life that he, Sharon, and Sam made with people in Tanzania. It is no surprise, therefore, that he wants theologians and others in "the North" to attend to a theology which may have resonances with, but speaks from beyond, their context with words of wisdom and challenge. As Robert says, to listen is to be open to God's grace as well as to a judgment on our presumption and the narrowness of our perspective. He sets his task to take very seriously the work of two pioneering African theologians, John S. Mbiti and Jesse N. K. Mugambi. His work challenges the hegemonic discourse of so-called Western theologians and postcolonial theologians and their much cherished vaunting of critical thought which is at risk of overlooking engagement with the work of those from the World Church. Robert Heaney's work was revealing to me in the way in which it unfolded the evolution of different forms of contextual theology. I had come across Mbiti as his work had been drawn to my attention fifty years ago by one of my teachers, Charlie Moule, who was Lady Margaret Professor at the University of Cambridge for many years. The thesis of Mbiti's first book is illuminated by the variegated cultural context of its genesis and gestation. Robert Heaney identifies a methodological shift that begins in Mbiti, is present in Mugambi and remains a chronic issue for all theologians. He offers both a sympathetically insightful reading of Mbiti and Mugambi's writings, as well as framing the reading within a post-colonial approach to theology. Thus he broadens our perspectives beyond any binary presentations of Europe and Africa, and offers the possibility of a postcolonial

theology nourished by the insight of Africa. Robert Heaney explores the contextualization of African theology, stressing the experience of particular people in a particular context as the point of theological departure. The ministry of Jesus is seen to correlate more closely with African traditional practice than with imported practice. Also, such contextualization is seen in the emphasis on symbol and praxis when considering the person of Christ, speaking from *within* African traditional religion as the one who is co-equal with a marginalized humanity. All this is complemented by a practical understanding of the analysis of power. Robert Heaney points out that there are ongoing theological, missiological, and pedagogical implications arising from listening to World Christianity, and listening to African theology in particular. Participationist, kenotic, and grassroots mission challenge overweening power and marginalization. Such theological themes are as important as the desire for cogency based on coherence. Teaching that begins with such counter-cultural discourse offer a different frame to Christian pedagogy.

In his conclusion Robert succinctly expresses his aim in this book when he writes:

... with the continued justifications of Euro-American Christian expansionism by missiologists, mission historians, and foreign missionaries, there remains much work to be done uncovering how imperialism and colonialism has often influenced Western theology. As is already seen, the existence of this lacuna undermines the ongoing claim that the pedagogy of the traditional colonial centres is, in practice, critical. In practical terms, responding to coloniality and contributing to a decolonizing critique will therefore mean, at the very least, an engagement with marginalized theology and theologians. For marginalized voices to interrupt or intervene in Eurocentric theology already redefines the discipline. For, as has been seen, no longer can coherency be a chief aim of the theological task. Instead, some sort of liberative or transformative practice will be the end goal for theology. Such reflections underline the concern that some within the movement have that abstract and abstruse theorizing, while important and potentially transformative, can too easily lead the field away from the concrete, historical, practical theologizing that has been going on in particular contexts and particular experiences for many years. It is hoped that a critical engagement with the writings of Mbiti and Mugambi, taking into account both weaknesses and

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possible constructive moves which their work evokes, begins to disrupt such abstractionism and abstruseness.

Amen to that. Liberative and transformative practice must be the end goal for theology too, for it too must be part of the messianic lifestyle which is the characteristic of the gospel of Jesus who came to preach good news to the poor.

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