

ARTICLE

Independent Churches and Black Liberation Theology in Africa: What Interactions?

Rodrick Kapwa

Abstract

This article demonstrates that the emergence of the African Independent Churches (AIC) has a strong link with Black liberation theology. The AICs have provided a decisive contextual framework for the development of this theology in Africa, while this, in turn, has legitimized the claims and aspirations of these churches. This study sheds new light on the intertwined history of these two major dynamics of African Christianity. In this way, it contributes to a better understanding of the evolution of Christianity on the continent and its intersections with social and political struggles for liberation. Building on this intertwined history, the article further argues that the AICs and Black liberation theology together constitute a privileged site for interreligious and intercultural dialogue in contemporary Africa. Situated on the border between missionary Christianity and traditional African religions, and attentive to the lived experience of African peoples, they offer a hermeneutical framework in which dialogue functions not as an intellectual luxury but as a historical, social, and theological necessity.

Keywords

African Independent Churches, Africa, Black liberation theology, colonialism, liberation struggles, interreligious dialogue, intercultural dialogue

Introduction

The emergence of the African Independent Churches (AIC) between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century has aroused great scientific interest. Born in the wake of missionary Christianity, they integrate elements of traditional African religions, marking the rooting of Christianity on the continent and a critique of the unsuitable missionary model. Two main causes explain their appearance: first, the deterioration of the African condition under colonization; second, an African rereading of Christianity, adapting the faith to the local cultural and spiritual context.

After independence, liberation theology transformed the religious landscape. It denounces the role of Christianity in colonial abuses and demands justice and dignity, as Desmond Tutu puts it: More than any other theology, liberation was born in the crucible of human suffering and anguish.¹ Jean-Marc Éla sees it as a “cry of the African man,” calling on the Church to resist postcolonial injustice.²

Although chronologically distinct, the AIC and this Black liberation theology maintain reciprocal influences. This article explores the interactions between Black liberation theology and AIC. As Rufus Ositelu notes, the acronym AIC covers a plurality of realities; here, it designates the independent African Churches of the phase of emergence (the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries).³ The analysis will focus on Francophone Africa and South Africa, without ignoring other contexts.

Using the method described, the article will be divided into three parts: a description of the AICs, Black liberation theology, and their mutual interactions.

I. The Emergence of AICs in Africa

1. History

As Éric De Rosny points out, the most serious phenomenon of Christianity in modern Africa is the development of AICs.⁴ The irruption of these

1 Desmond Tutu, “La théologie de la libération en Afrique,” in *Libération ou adaptation? La théologie Africaine s’interroge*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi (L’Harmattan, 1979), 195.

2 Jean-Marc Éla, *Ma foi d’Africain* (Karthala, 1985), 213.

3 Rufus Ositelu, *African Initiated Churches: Diversities, Growth, Gifts, Spirituality, and Ecumenical Understanding of African Initiated Churches* (LIT, 2002), 38.

4 Eric de Rosny, *L’Afrique des guérisons* (Karthala, 1992), 239.

Churches in Africa occurred during the colonial period in the context of many societies belonging to Christianized Black Africa. It was the emergence of messianic movements in Africa that eventually gave rise to the African churches.⁵ Called African Independent Churches or Indigenous Churches, these churches were founded in Africa, by Africans and for Africans, breaking away from the historical missionary churches.⁶

It is noteworthy that the reaction of Africans to the missionary churches has been expressed in four ways: acceptance, rejection, adaptation, and indifference. The development of the AICs is situated in the perspective of those who, on the one hand, rejected the teachings of the missionaries and, on the other hand, those who adapted their teachings. The AICs were of two types, those that emerged from a split with existing white churches and those that arose independently of any existing religious group.⁷

History reveals that several causes have pushed Africans to seek religious independence from institutional churches.

2. Causes

For many scholars, the context of the emergence of African Independent Churches has been political, social, and religious, without any dogmatic opposition. As we will demonstrate below, the African Independent Churches share with Black liberation theology the desire to contextualize the Christian faith in the struggle for social justice and the dignity of the oppressed in Africa. Thus, without denying the many causes mentioned by scientists on this issue, we explain in our article two major causes that have given rise to AICs in Africa.

AICs as a Response to White Ostracism. Balandier situates the proliferation of African independent churches in the logic of a reaction against the colonial situation and the domination exercised by European minorities. The colonial situation led the African Independent Churches to exalt African values, and to return to African culture in order to affirm it before Europeans.⁸

5 George Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire: dynamique sociale en Afrique centrale*, 3rd ed. (Presse Universitaire de France, 1963), 417.

6 André Mary, "Introduction: Africanité et christianité: une interaction première," *Archives des sciences des religions* 143 (2008): 9–30, 11–12.

7 Kofi Asare Opoku, "La religion en Afrique pendant l'époque coloniale," in *Histoire générale de l'Afrique, Vol. VII : L'Afrique sous domination coloniale 1880–1935*, ed. Albert Adu Boahen, (UNESCO, [1987] 2000), 569.

8 George Balandier, "Messianismes et nationalisme en Afrique noire," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 7, no. 14 (1953): 41–65.

For Kā Mana, the birth of the African Independent Churches was directly affirmed as a religious dynamic with a political orientation. He describes the African Independent Churches as “a breath of protest not only against official Christianity in its betrayal of the Gospel, but against the system of colonial rule as a whole.”⁹ Abel Kouvouama insists on the same subject, pointing to the anti-colonialist, nationalist and even revolutionary characteristics of the indigenous religious movements, which ended up giving birth to the AICs.¹⁰

The extension of the African Independent Churches extended to South Africa, Central and East Africa, and the Gulf of Guinea. Balandier affirms the idea that the phenomenon of African independent churches is located in the regions where Christianity was most intensive and where racial discrimination was most pronounced, it is exactly between the Cape and the Congo River.¹¹ Balandier’s thesis is not unanimously accepted by current scholars. Today the majority of scholars believe that the birth of African Independent churches was nourished by different reasons depending on the context. In the context of South Africa, for example, the emergence of the Ethiopian and Zionist churches focused mainly on the ostracism of the white churches, which the apartheid regime could only reinforce. For the Congo Free State, the whip or *chicotte* was one of the punishments reserved for Africans; it was a practice provided for by criminal law until 1940 and by disciplinary law in the army and in prison. It could also be executed based on custom. Already denounced by several contemporary European observers and critics of Stanley’s expeditions and activities in the Congo, even before the founding of the Congo Free State, the use of the *chicotte* became increasingly associated with colonial coercion. The ignorance, whether deliberate or otherwise, of the conditions governing its application, together with the cruel treatment that often accompanied it, contributed to making the *chicotte* a powerful symbol of colonial oppression.¹²

The African Independent Churches have played an important role in the defence of human rights. They encouraged communities to claim their rights and value their traditions, opposing forced assimilation. The AICs have been firm in their criticism of the injustices and abuses perpetrated by the colonizers, they have sought to awaken the collective consciousness on the issue of Black rights. Like many charismatic prophets of AICs, Williams

9 Kā Mana, “Les Eglises indépendantes en mutation,” *Esprit* 317, no. 8/9 (2005): 118–123, 119.

10 Abel Kouvouama, *Une histoire du messianisme: Un “monde renversé”* (Karthala 2018), 18.

11 Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l’Afrique noire*, 419.

12 Jean-Luc Vellut, *La mémoire du Congo. Le temps colonial* (Éditions Snoeck, 2005), 15.

Wade Harris denounced the abuses and injustices of colonization, seeking to unify people around a new faith that rejected practices he saw as destructive. His movement encouraged a form of resistance in the face of colonial oppression. Harris' reaction did not go unnoticed, and in 1914 he was expelled from the Ivory Coast after his movement gained momentum.¹³ William Harris' movement left a complex legacy, oscillating between resisting colonial oppression and promoting a new religious vision. Although contested, his movement continued to fight against colonial injustices and to claim the rights of local populations.¹⁴ Almost on the same trajectory, Simon Kimbangu, the precursor of Kimbanguism, never encouraged violent forms of resistance, but beyond the healings and miracles he performed, he also preached against the colonial order, insisting on the nature of love that advocates equality between races.¹⁵ Kimbanguism in the Congo directly supported the struggle for independence by providing an organizational and ideological framework.¹⁶

The AICs have also provided spaces for national movements to come together and reflect. They have enabled a large-scale mobilization of the population. By rejecting the control of European mission churches, the AICs contributed to the cultural and spiritual emancipation of Africans. This process of Africanization nurtured a sense of pride and self-confidence that was essential for political struggles for independence. It has made it possible to reappropriate Christianity.¹⁷

A Spiritual Quest and a Theological Re-evaluation. The spiritual search within the AIC has manifested itself in a desire for authenticity and closeness to the realities lived by the faithful. John Mbiti says a lot about the ambivalence between missionary Christianity and African spirituality. He points out that, for many Africans, missionary Christianity meant a set of rules to be observed, promises for the other world, hymns without rhythm, a ritual to be followed, and a few other outward gestures. For many Africans, missionary Christianity was perceived as largely confined to formal church activities, particularly Sunday worship and occasional weekly services, with limited

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- 13 Williams Wade Harris (1860–1929) was a Liberian grebo evangelist who preached in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana.
 - 14 André Mary, "William Wade Harris: Prophète des derniers temps," *Ethnologie française* 46, no. 3 (2016): 437–446, 445.
 - 15 Simon Kimbangu (1887–1951) was a Congolese religious leader and founder of Kimbanguism.
 - 16 Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot, *Kimbanguism: An African Understanding of the Bible* (Penn State University Press, 2017), 68.
 - 17 Anne-Marie Goguel, "Églises, mouvements religieux et changements sociaux en Afrique du Sud," *Revue Tiers-Monde* 31, no. 123 (1990): 559–583.

integration into the broader social, cultural, and everyday realities of African communities. In contrast, African Independent Churches sought to embody Christianity as a more comprehensive way of life, addressing spiritual, social, cultural, and communal needs within African contexts. It was an active Christianity inside a church building. Traditionally, Africans do not receive enough religion of this type because it does not fill their entire existence and their conception of the universe. The AICs were places where many Africans felt at home, not only to worship, but also to confess and express their Christian faith. Sheltered from AIC, African Christians can freely shed their tears, sing about their pains, present their spiritual and physical needs, listen to the world in which they live, and “empty their bags” before God. The AICs were an attempt to rebuild new foundations that could replace the disintegration of traditional solidarity.¹⁸

The AICs focused their messages and practice on healing and prophetism. This perspective gave the AIC a headstart over the missionary churches that did not, in large part, believe in spirits and witchcraft. The AICs have presented a dynamic response to the spiritual needs of many Africans. Healing and prophecy provided an alternative to traditional forms of Christianity and a framework for addressing the socio-political challenges of the time. By healing, Eric de Rosny emphasizes that we must understand the return to health in the broad traditional sense of the word, i.e., to social harmony as much as to physical form, to well-being under the gaze of God. To heal is to find lost harmony, and, in the first place, to heal fear and anxiety. These healing rituals are essentially occupied by community prayer. This form of prayer offers an almost physical feeling of being answered, which culminates in trance. This ancient form of possession, which manifests the coming of *genii* or ancestors, also reveals the presence of the Holy Spirit. It does not only mean that the Spirit coexists with the possessed person, but that it replaces him momentarily.¹⁹ Almost all the prophetic figures who were the forerunners of the AICs were miracle workers and great prophets, such as Kimbangu, Williams Harris, Isaiah Shembe.²⁰

The theology of the salvation of souls, as well as the theology of the foundation of Christianity, were the greatest infirmities of missionary evangelization during the colonial period. The theology of the salvation of souls, as Gabriel Chunanga evokes, strove to convert the indigenous populations of Africa to Christianity and to plant local churches that were to

18 John Mbiti, *Religions et philosophie africaines* (Clé, 1972), 241.

19 Eric de Rosny, “Les Églises indépendantes africaines. Fonction sociale et originalité culturelle,” *Études* 358, no. 1 (1983): 93–108, 98–99.

20 Isaiah Mloyiswa Mdliwamafa Shembe (1865–1935), was a South African prophet and founder of the Ibandla LamaNazareth.

reflect the Church of Rome, with its doctrine, its liturgy, its institutional organization, in the Western cultural context. In pursuing the spiritual conversion and salvation of Africans, this theological approach did not always adequately consider the cultural realities, social contexts, and religious worldviews of African peoples. The theology of the foundation of Christianity was in turn nothing less than the transposition of Christianity as it was experienced in the West into the cultural and geographical context of sub-Saharan Africa. These theologies have been criticized for being limited to the sphere of values, systems, practices, and rites, deeply immersed in Western culture. These theologies generated a set of frustrations related to the lack of knowledge of African values and dignity, which led to the birth of several theologies in Africa with attractions for the culture and system of representation.²¹

In response to these challenges, notes Marthinus Louis Daneel, the AICs have developed a relevant theology of religions, not in written form, but in preached form. Their religious life itself represented a rudimentary and unsophisticated process of contextualization, but in many ways original and authentic. The AICs have created a type of context in which dialogue and confrontation between the Christian message and traditional religion takes place in a coherent way. In this interaction, a form of Christianity emerged, an existence-oriented Christianity. This form of belief, which is often reproached for having some syncretic weaknesses, was nevertheless full of profound ideas and truths that made the good news alive in the African world. The AICs have discovered the need for a proximity between the preaching and the real needs of their listeners. The AICs have understood that for preaching to be effective and creative, it must be close to the set of beliefs, the revealed message, and it must be close to the real concerns and needs of the congregation.²²

II. Black Liberation Theology

The term liberation theology was first used by Gustavo Gutiérrez in 1968. In his book *Liberation Theology*, he defines liberation theology as the search for an answer to the relationship between Christian salvation and the historical process of liberation of the human being. For Gutiérrez, liberation theology

21 Gabriel Tchongang, "Brève histoire de la théologie africaine," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 84, no. 2 (2010): 175–190, 176–177.

22 Marthinus Louis Daneel, "Towards a Theologia Africana: The Contribution of Independent Church to African Theology," *Missionalia* 12, no. 2 (1984): 64–89, 67–70.

is based on praxis, viewed from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed.²³ In this approach, theological praxis constitutes the first act, while theological elaboration proper is conceived as a second act. Liberation theology is thus described as “a way of living and celebrating faith, a way of acting and intervening in society, a way of shaping individual and collective, ecclesial and social life.”²⁴ The perspective of the poor and oppressed leads to an understanding of God as the Savior and Deliverer of those who suffer injustice. Additionally, Leonardo Boff, one of the leading exponents of liberation theology, emphasizes that liberation theology aims at the integral liberation of the human being. It cannot be reduced to a simple socio-political movement, because it integrates the physical, social, spiritual and eschatological dimensions of human existence at the same time.²⁵

Black liberation theology is part of this dynamic while being deeply marked by global Black liberation movements, such as Black Power and postcolonial pan-African currents. It affirms that God stands on the side of the oppressed and that the Gospel calls for concrete social transformation, both in Africa and in the Black diaspora. This theology is understood as a historical continuity linking the experiences of slavery, colonization, and segregation to contemporary struggles for civil rights and social justice.

In the African context, African theology has emerged as a process of theologization rooted in the cultural, historical, and socio-economic realities of the continent. It has gradually integrated issues related to postcolonialism, development, structural poverty, and the quest for an authentically African religious identity.

In this context, Black liberation theology can be seen as a specific expression of African theology. While sharing methods of contextualization and liberation, it places greater emphasis on racial oppression and historical violence inherited from colonial and postcolonial domination. Jean-Marc Ela, one of Africa’s leading liberation theologians, insists that one cannot rediscover Christ in the poor without concretely sharing in his struggle for life and dignity.²⁶ It should be noted, however, that Black liberation theology has not had the same resonance in all regions of Africa. It was expressed with particular acuity in the former colonial territories where domination was more brutal, particularly in French-speaking Africa, Belgian Africa, and especially in South Africa, marked by the apartheid regime.

23 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Théologie de la libération*, trans. F. O’Malley, Perspectives (Lumen Vitae, 1974), 57.

24 Francisco de Aquino Júnior, “Actualité de la Théologie de la libération,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 68, no. 3 (2012): 681–699, 683–687.

25 Leonardo Boff, *Jésus-Christ libérateur. Essai de christologie critique* (Cerf, 1974).

26 Jean-Marc Ela, *Repenser la théologie africaine. Dieu qui libère* (Karthala, 2003), 88.

1. *Definition and Justification of Black Liberation Theology*

For Allan Boesak, Black liberation theology is a theology “in situation.” It analyzes the condition of Black people in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the Black community can recognize that the gospel is commensurate with Black humanity and its aspirations. Black theology is thus a liberation theology for Blacks, seeking to interpret the Black experience from the Christian faith.²⁷ Black theology is liberation theology for Black people. It seeks to probe the Black condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the Black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievements of Black humanity.²⁸

Without contradicting this perspective, it is important to note that other forms of Black theology coexist with Black liberation theology. This is particularly the case with the African theology of inculturation, which aims to make the Gospel penetrate every culture in a way that is alive, creative, and faithful to the identity of the African peoples.

Even before the independence of the 1960s, Africa was already experiencing forms of political awakening and anti-colonial protest, notably through the Négritude movement, led by Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the pan-African thought embodied by Kwame Nkrumah. In the post-1960 period, Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness Movement continued this dynamic of liberation in southern Africa.

However, it was in the United States of America that Black liberation theology took the systematic form we know today, in the context of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Inspired by Latin American liberation theology, it aimed to denounce social injustices and promote the dignity of the oppressed. In sub-Saharan Africa, Black liberation theology developed in reaction to white supremacy and oppression, finding in South Africa, as early as the 1970s, a privileged ground of theological resistance against apartheid.²⁹

Desmond Tutu points out that, like all liberation theology, Black liberation theology was born out of an attempt to understand the suffering of the victims of institutionalized oppression and exploitation. It affirms that the oppressed are human persons created in the image of God, redeemed by Christ and sanctified by the Spirit. This awareness has enabled Africans to

27 Allan A. Boesak, *Farewell to innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Orbis Books, 1977), 510–511.

28 Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology. An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought, Second Edition*, (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 206.

29 Sandisele L. Xhinti, “Revisiting Black Theology of Liberation in South Africa: Through “New Voices” of Women Black Theologians,” *HTS Theologiese Studies* 77, no. 3 (2021): 10.4102/hts.v77i3.5816.

rediscover their dignity, their historical responsibility and their vocation to participate.³⁰

Black theology is also a theology of “négritude,” in the sense that it affirms Black humanity in the face of racism and dehumanization. It is based on the lived experience of Black people, in America as well as in Africa. James H. Cone argues in this regard that any truly Black theology must reflect on what it means to be Black, bringing out its categories of interpretation from the Black experience itself.³¹

Faithful to the Sacred Scriptures, Black liberation theology presents God as a God of compassion who, in Jesus Christ, comes to liberate all humanity (John 8:34–36). It sees liberation not as a mere aspect of the gospel, but as its fundamental content and framework. Liberation is thus understood as total, encompassing all dimensions of human life.³²

2. *The Stakes of Liberation*

Liberation theology in Africa is expressed as a Black theology because of its roots in the specific experience of African peoples facing racial, political, social, and economic oppression. Starting from the suffering, resistance, and quest for liberation of Black populations, she rejects any abstract or universalizing theologization that ignores concrete historical contexts.

Black liberation theology acts as both a deconstruction and a reconstruction. It deconstructs Eurocentric theological narratives that have marginalized the Black experience and served to justify oppression. It is opposed to a universalizing reading of Christianity that does not take into account the realities experienced by Black people. European missionaries often presented a God shaped by their own worldview, which the African peoples were forced to receive. However, this God was not always the God of the Gospel, but an ideological construction in the service of colonial domination.³³

The success of Christianity in Africa after the colonial period cannot be explained by the acceptance of European Christianity, but by its appropriation and transformation. Inculturation, particularly encouraged by

30 Allan Boesak, “La théologie de la libération en Afrique du Sud,” in *Libération ou adaptation? La théologie Africaine s’interroge*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi (L’Harmattan, 1979), 203–204.

31 James H. Cone, *La noirceur de Dieu*, trans. M. Jean and J. Philibert (Labor et Fides, 1989), 35.

32 Isabel Apawo Phiri and Julius Gathogo, “A Reconstructive Motif in South African Black Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36, Supplement (2010): 185–206, 188.

33 Daneel, “Towards a Theologia Africana,” 72.

the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), is a significant illustration of this, as evidenced.³⁴

Black liberation theology, however, is not limited to a critique of Western Christianity; it also pursues a project of reconstruction. It proposes a theological vision centered on the dignity, freedom and autonomy of Black peoples. This reconstruction touches the identity of Africans, as well as their social and spiritual imagination, integrating their history, culture, and struggles as essential foundations of theological reflection.³⁵

Africans soon realized that the Eurocentric understanding of the gospel had no other purpose than to reduce them to a state of blind obedience. It took several years for blacks to ask fundamental questions about biblical principles veiled by white theology. How can a God of love, who created all men in his own image (Gen. 2:27), accept that some live oppressed? Thus, Black theology was an answer to the many questions that Black people had about the nature of the gospel. Black liberation theology has found an accessible language of the gospel for the African people. Francisca Chimhanda points out that in the South African context, the oppressed Black masses were both speakers (committed to providing answers to their oppressive situation in terms of liberation and salvation) and interlocutors (they were asked questions about their situation and about divine and human action in the realization of human freedom).³⁶

Black theology exhorts the oppressed not to allow themselves to be overcome by hatred, self-pity, and bitterness, feelings as dehumanizing as persecution itself. As with the theology of James H. Cone in the context of the United States of America, Black theology in Africa seeks to build a faith that enables Africans to love their blackness, endure terrible hardships, and resist pain without losing their sanity in the struggle for freedom.³⁷ The concept of “blackness” used here is much more than just pigmentation of a person’s skin. In the context of Black theology and consciousness, négritude

34 Read Barthélemy Adoukounou, “Vatican II et l’Inculturation. Emergence de la question du sujet et de la culture comme clef herméneutique du Concile,” (paper given at “La 28ème Semaine Théologique sur l’Évangélisation en profondeur, 50 ans après Vatican II. Chemins de l’expression, de la célébration et du vécu de la foi chrétienne en RDC,” Kinshasa, April 22–26, 2013) and Ludovic Lado, “Cultures hybrides, identités multiples: Repenser l’inculturation en Afrique,” *Études* 404, no. 4 (2006): 452–462.

35 To learn more about the concept, see Kā Mana, *L’Afrique va-t-elle mourir? Bousculer l’imaginaire africain. Essai d’éthique politique* (Cerf, 1991).

36 Francisca Chimhanda, “Simon Maimla and the prophetic vision of liberation for Black Theology,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (2010): 21.

37 Leslie R. James, “Cone and Cannon: Black Theology and Visions of Society,” *Journal of Black Religious Thought* 1, no. 1 (2022): 88–100, 90.

refers to solidarity in the suffering and oppression of the descendants of those who suffered under slavery and colonialism. This is how Boesak insists on the necessity of self-love, emphasizing that this love is not a love for Blacks and a hatred against whites. On the contrary, Black theology advocates self-love by referring not to hatred of whites, but rather to the awareness that in the brotherly relationship between Blacks and whites, neither is the slave of the other.³⁸

Black theology promotes the idea that Western values should no longer be considered as a reference.³⁹ Speaking of Cone, Eugene Baron emphasizes that it was important to address these questions about the situation of Black people because the gospel was addressed to human beings (John 3:16) and, therefore, human dignity includes the message and content of the gospel. Liberation theology in Africa has been an integral part of the Black struggle for freedom, it has tried to help oppressed Africans to build a sense of pride in their qualities as men, to look others in the eye and to talk to them face to face, and not as if they should be forgiven for being Black. As we have said before, Black liberation theology is a theology of blackness, “it affirms the humanity of whites in that it says ‘no’ to white encroachment and oppression.”⁴⁰

III. Reciprocal Influences between the Emergence of African Independent Churches and Black Liberation Theology in Africa

In his book, *Théologie, libération et cultures africaines*, Engelbert Mveng asserts that liberation theology was not born in America but in Africa.⁴¹ According to him, this theology was born out of the quest for a new African way of reading the Bible, which is how the fundamental principle of liberation theology was born in South Africa and then in the former colonies within Africa. Its immediate consequences were the creation of the AICs.⁴² The Congolese theologian, Ngindu Mushete, also goes in the same direction, pointing out that liberation theology in Africa predates that of Latin America because this theology is the one that gave birth to the AICs.⁴³ For

38 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 2010), 7–8.

39 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 27–28.

40 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 18.

41 Engelbert Mveng and Benjamin L. Lipawing, *Théologie, libération et culture africaines: Dialogue sur l'anthropologie négro-africain* (Cle; Présence Africaine, 1996).

42 Mveng and Lipawing, *Théologie, libération et culture africaines*, 28–29.

43 Ngindu Mutshete, *Les thèmes majeurs de la théologie africaine* (L'Harmattan, 1989), 99.

Tinyiko Maluleke, Black African culture and Indigenous or African Independent churches are the interlocutors of Black theology. He argues that in many Black theology conferences, AICs have been and still are mentioned.⁴⁴

From these statements, we can therefore summarize that there is a clear connection between the AICs and Black liberation theology. For most scholars, it is Black liberation theology that is the basis for the creation of Indigenous churches. This statement is not false, but it is essential to note that it was from the 1960s that Black theology emerged in North America with emblematic figures such as James H. Cone and James Deotis Roberts, and then it reached colonized Africa, more particularly South Africa, in 1972. On the other hand, the emergence of AICs took place at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, these churches predated the wave of independence in Africa. This chronological divergence suggests that the AICs cannot be considered a direct product of this theology. It is true that Black liberation theology has influenced some AICs, especially in South Africa in the 1970s, but this does not mean that all these churches are derived from it. The AICs have their own cultural and historical roots that pre-exist Black liberation theology. It is crucial to recognize the historical autonomy of the AICs and their development before the emergence of Black theology. It should also be noted that the AICs are considered to be faithful to their own cultural ways of being in the world and this did not equate to a Black consciousness. This is not the case with Black liberation theology. Kelebogile T. Resane points out that Black theology, perceived as an aspect of the nationalist liberation struggle, developed a close relationship with Black Consciousness through its contextualized approach. These two intellectual and ideological movements worked in synergy to challenge the oppressive regime that marginalized Black communities and undermined social and natural justice.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, a full understanding of the interactions between Black liberation theology and AICs must take into account distinct historical contexts and reciprocal influences, rather than simplifying this relationship to mere causality. Several AICs were born in their own theo-cultural framework, without any connection to Black liberation theology.

44 Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Black Theology as Public Discourse," in *Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life: Multi-event 1999 Academic Workshop Papers*, ed. James R. Cochrane, (University of Cape Town, 1998), 60–62.

45 Kelebogile T. Resane, "Black Consciousness and Black Theology: Di ya thoteng di bapile (relationship for liberation)" *HTS Theologiese Studies* 80, no. 2 (2024): <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9001>.

1. *Black Theology as a Framework for Theological Legitimation of the Practices and Beliefs of the AICs*

Like African religions in general, AICs were also marginalized by missionaries and colonizers during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. It is essential to emphasize that in the nineteenth century, African values were not highly valued in the Western world. On the contrary, descriptions of Africa and Africans written by European authors contributed to the fall of Black Africans further and lower on the scale of humanity. For example, in 1813, John Balamy devoted fifteen pages of his *History of All Religions* to the religions of India, but as for the religions of Africa, he devoted only two pages, to which he described them as “paganism.” This attitude was also observed at the World Congress of Religions in 1893, where African religions were completely erased from the progressive intellectual vision. The restitutions of this Congress did not pay attention to African religions. Even a century later this view has not changed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Edwin W. Smith, in his book *The Religion of Lower Races, as Illustrated by African Bantu*, describes the African religion as “a religion of fear” and “elementary.” The neglect of African religious practices lays bare a long history deeply rooted in European racism.⁴⁶

The origin of the contempt shown by the missionary enterprise in the face of the emergence of the AICs thus finds its origins in the contempt of the European powers for the African people.

It is important to note that AICs are characterized by a lack of formal written theology. Most AICs have little to do with doctrine in the Western sense of an elaborate and systematic document of faith containing the essence of dogma. For their part, the African Independent Churches have developed a theology not in written form; rather, their theology is preached and put into practice in symbolic rituals. The main causes of the lack of a written theology of AICs are related to several paradigms. First, because of their origins, the AICs are the result of local and popular initiatives, which have led to a less academic and more practical approach to the faith. Secondly, the majority of African Independent Churches also centered all their doctrine on spiritual experience where healing and salvation were a major focus. Ultimately, the African Independent Churches have not been able to develop a written theology due to the lack of theological training among the founding leaders as well as the majority of those who succeeded them. Despite this, the creative genius of the African Independent Churches

46 Edwin W. Smith, *The Religion of Lower Races: As Illustrated by the African Bantu* (Macmillan, 1923), 33 and Irving Hexham, *Understanding World Religions* (Zondervan Academic, 2019), 37–41.

lies in the fact that they have developed a framework for the production and maintenance of knowledge through orality and ecological awareness. Oral traditions, at the heart of African civilizations without dominant scripts, served as the main vector for preserving collective memory, including mythical tales, proverbs, and epics that encoded enduring practices in several sectors such as the religious sector of the African Independent Churches.⁴⁷ The transmission of “word of mouth” and “from master to disciple” plays a great role in the maintenance and transmission of rites and symbolisms within the African Independent Churches.

The absence of theological rigidity has been the cardinal element, at the origin of the doctrinal loss and lack of legitimacy of several African Independent Churches over the years. Having no elites trained in universities or seminaries, the African Independent Churches have struggled to legitimize their faith and to respond in a formal and epidemiological way to the multiple assaults of their detractors. Now, as M. L. Daneel points out, the proliferation of churches in Africa indicates that Africa, like Oceania, are continents outside the West where the Christian message has had a significant impact since the Christianization of the Mediterranean and European peoples during the first millennium of our era. The absence of similar Independent Churches in countries such as Japan, China, India, and Pakistan is clear evidence that the gospel has not had an impact in Asia as it has in Africa. Unfortunately, this truth has had enormous difficulty in asserting itself in the scientific world, because the African Independent Churches have been clothed with several prejudices.⁴⁸

Although the phase of independence in Africa may have legitimized African Independent Churches in some countries, such as Kimbanguism in the DRC, in most countries, African Independent Churches continued to be perceived as a form of paganism. This is mainly due in part to their religious syncretism, that is, their ability to integrate elements of traditional African religions into their practice of Christianity. This negative perception persisted for a long time and was sometimes reinforced by traditional missionary churches who saw these movements as a threat to their religious monopoly. Black theology put forward the idea that African Christianity should be rooted in the continent’s culture and history, not just a Western import.

Black theology has allowed for the reaffirmation of two key principles of the African Independent Churches, namely, the struggle against colonial

47 Jan Vansina, “La tradition orale et sa méthode,” in *Histoire générale de l’Afrique: Méthodologie et préhistoire africaine*, ed. Joseph Ki-Zerbo (UNESCO, 2000), 167–190.

48 Marthinus Louis Daneel, *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to a study of African Independent Churches*, MissioPastoral Series No. 17 (Mambo Press, 1987), 43.

brutality and a spiritual and theological renewal. This is how Cone evokes that for Black theology, Christianity is first and foremost “a religion of freedom” and that the role of Black theology articulated by Cone is to analyze the meaning of the liberation of the oppressed and to make it aware of the scriptural legitimacy of their struggle. He insisted that the liberation of those who are oppressed is not extrabiblical. The Gospel is above all the liberation of those who are oppressed, because when the Gospel fails to bring about the emergence of communities of the oppressed, it ceases to be evangelical. Desmond Tutu also points out that as liberation theology, Black theology is now part of the struggle for the deliverance of the people. From a spiritual and theological point of view, for the victims of oppression and injustice it is important to hear that the God of their faith is the liberating God, the God of the Exodus, who led a people from slavery to glorious freedom.⁴⁹

2. *The Emergence of AICs as Fertile Ground for the Contextual Approach to Black Theology in Africa*

One of the creative geniuses of AICs is the contextual approach. It should be recalled that the contextualization of theology in Africa is a dynamic process that aims to adapt Christian theology to cultural, social, and economic realities of the continent. Contextualization goes beyond the idea of a simple indigenization of the gospel; it is not just a response to the gospel in the terms of a traditional culture. The contextualization born of the original encounter between the Word of God and the world. It presents itself as a dynamic process that recognizes the ever-changing nature of all human situations and the possibility that change will pave the way for the future.⁵⁰ Ndidi Gbule insists that theology cannot take place in a historical vacuum: theology is inscribed in time and space and is therefore inevitably linked to culture. Contextualization is meant to be a pastoral theology that responds to the needs of Christians in a more penetrating and powerful way, so that the Gospel may come to life and be rooted in the culture of peoples.⁵¹

Robert Schreiter distinguishes between models of translation, adaptation, and contextualization in the construction of local theology. He clarifies that contextual models, as the name suggests, focus more directly on the cultural context in which Christianity takes root and expresses itself.

49 Desmond Tutu, *Liberation Theology in Africa*, 196–199.

50 Sebastien Kalombo Kapuku, “Les théologies protestantes et la contextualisation de la parole de Dieu” *Mouvements et Enjeux Sociaux—Revue Internationale des Dynamiques Sociales* 109 (2019): 20–29, 23.

51 Ndidi Justice Gbule, “Contextualization of Christianity in Africa: A Dialectic,” *Icheke revue de la faculté des sciences humaines* 16, no. 1 (2024): 407–408.

Contextual models are seen as embodying the ideals of what local theology should be, even if the implementation of these ideals often proves difficult in practice.⁵²

Contextualization is a central concept of Black liberation theology in Africa, involving an interpretation of biblical texts that focuses on the lived experiences of Black people. This perception is not an innovation of Black theology, for it has its deep roots in the theological construction of the African independent churches.

Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa understands the practice of AICs as a theological expression, a form of legitimate contextualization, and an illustration of African Christianity.⁵³ Since their emergence, the AICs have always been attempts to Africanize Christianity. The people who initiated the AICs aimed to penetrate the African man deeply. Missionary work, as we have emphasized with its theology of the salvation of souls, has not succeeded in linking the African man to true Christianity. The “indigenous” churches have succeeded in making Christianity real and meaningful for their faithful by taking up in their rites, with prudence and wisdom, certain local cultural elements.

The AICs have addressed the problem of identity somewhat in their adapted rituals, their conflicting sermons, their dialogue with representatives of the African religious worldview, and ritualized symbolism; they have produced a creative solution in their quest to be both authentically African and authentically Christian.⁵⁴ This creative solution of the AICs is a jumble of contextual theology in Africa. The AICs provided a new theological angle that would be exploited and legitimized by Black theology in the African continent. The AICs have developed and reinterpreted the Gospel message in an African context. They adopted the customs of the Church culturally, producing raw material for African theology in general and Black theology in particular with regard to Christian ministry in dialogue with culture.

3. Black liberation theology and AICs as an opening to intercultural and interreligious dialogue in Africa

Jean-Claude Bassat defines interreligious dialogue as an exchange of words and a reciprocal listening committed on an equal footing to believers from

52 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Orbis Books, 2015), 14.

53 Teddy Chalwe Sakupapa, “Tracking the Decolonial in African Christian Theology. A Southern African Perspective on Mission from the Margins as a Decolonial Mode of Mission,” *International Review of Mission* 112, no. 2 (2023): 202–217, 205.

54 Daneel, “Quest for Belonging,” 71.

different religious traditions. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue is thus situated beyond mere coexistence, which it presupposes, and below symbiosis, which would render any dialogue superfluous. In a true dialogical dynamic, confrontation is no longer synonymous with opposition or conflict, but becomes recognition and respect for differences, in the maintenance of the convictions proper to each religious tradition. Bassat also emphasizes that, since the Second World War, interreligious dialogue has been intrinsically linked to cultural dialogue and ecumenical dialogue, as these dimensions are interdependent in the construction of a peaceful world.⁵⁵

Historically, several contemporary initiatives have marked the emergence of interreligious dialogue on a global scale. The Parliament of the World's Religions, held in 1893 in Chicago, was the first significant attempt to establish comprehensive interfaith dialogue. However, this initiative did not really bear fruit until after the Second World War, when European religious structures met at the Seelisberg Conference in 1947 to analyze the causes of Christian anti-Judaism and antisemitism. These dynamics led, in 1948, to the creation of the World Council of Churches, which first brought together the Protestant churches, before gradually opening to other Christian traditions. On the side of the Catholic Church, it was the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) that officially opened the way to interreligious dialogue, notably through a theological rereading of the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religions.

In this context, Black liberation theology and the African Independent Churches can be understood as privileged spaces for openness to interreligious and intercultural dialogue in contemporary Africa. However, a question arises: Why speak of interreligious and intercultural dialogue when Black liberation theology and the AICs claim to be above all Christian movements? While it is undeniable that ecumenical dialogue is a real issue in the relations between the AICs and the historic Churches, it is above all interreligious and intercultural dialogue—often not formalized—that appears to be the major theological site of African creativity. In Africa, interreligious and intercultural dialogue is neither an intellectual luxury nor a secondary pastoral option; it is a historical, social, and theological necessity. The African context, marked by an ancient religious plurality and by the complex legacy of colonization, imposes a dialogical approach as a condition for peaceful coexistence, social justice, and fidelity to the Gospel.

We believe that the need for interreligious and intercultural dialogue is imperative for Africa as a whole. Historically, the need for dialogue must be

55 Jean-Claude Bassat, *Interreligious Dialogue: Chance or Decline of Faith* (Cerf, 1996), 27–28.

understood as a form of symbolic reparation. Long before the spread of Islam and Christianity in Africa, traditional African religions were already structuring all African societies spiritually, socially, and culturally. Christian evangelization and the spread of Islam have often been accompanied by a hierarchy of religions, relegating African religious traditions to inferior or marginal forms. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue therefore aims to restore the dignity of these traditions and to recognize their constitutive role in the religious identity of African peoples. On the social and political level, this necessity is part of the context of contemporary African societies, crossed by religious tensions, identity conflicts, and political instrumentalizations of religion. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue thus appears as a tool for social pacification and the construction of living together. Finally, on the theological level, dialogue is a requirement deriving from the Christian faith itself, insofar as the proclamation of the Gospel cannot be credible without a real recognition of the cultural and religious contexts in which it takes place.

In this perspective, Volker Küster, in his article “Intercultural Theology Is a Must,” proposes three methodological and terminological tools for structuring interreligious and intercultural dialogue: ethics, hermeneutics, and aesthetics.⁵⁶ This study mainly mobilizes hermeneutics as a key to understanding interreligious and intercultural dialogue in Africa. According to Küster, understanding the other presupposes the accumulation of knowledge about him, but this acquisition can only take place in a dialogical process, in which the other must be able to recognize himself in the perception and interpretation that is proposed of him. Conversely, communication only becomes effective when what is expressed is relevant in the context of the interlocutor.⁵⁷

We can emphasize that Black liberation theology and the African Independent Churches offer precisely a fruitful hermeneutical framework for interreligious and intercultural dialogue in Africa. Black liberation theology starts from the lived experience of Black African populations; it questions the religious boundaries imposed by colonization while valuing a cultural continuity that has long been denied. It proposes a reading of the Christian faith in dialogue with the demands of social justice and the aspirations for freedom of the African peoples, thus deconstructing the image of a Christianity disconnected from the realities of postcolonial Africa. As for the AICs, they do not only dialogue with Catholicism, Protestantism, and Pentecostalism; they are located on the border between historical missionary

56 Volker Küster, “Intercultural Theology is a Must,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38, no. 4 (2014): 171–176, 174.

57 Küster, “Intercultural Theology is a Must,” 174.

Christianity and traditional African religions. This liminal position confers on them a major responsibility in contemporary Africa, namely, as privileged places of interpretation, mediation, and recomposition of religion in a pluralist context.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the close link between the emergence of African Independent Churches and Black liberation theology in Africa. These two movements, although distinct in their genesis, influenced each other, helping to shape an African Christianity rooted in local realities and committed to struggles for justice and Black dignity.

We have shown how Black liberation theology has been nourished by AIC experiences and claims, finding in their practices and discourses a source of inspiration for a contextual approach to faith. Conversely, the AICs found in Black liberation theology a theoretical framework and an intellectual justification for their own aspirations. The AICs and Black Liberation Theology also constitute an imperative framework for the construction of interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the context of contemporary Africa.

This study also revealed the richness and complexity of the African religious landscape, marked by remarkable creativity and adaptability. It stressed the importance of interactions between religious movements and social dynamics in understanding contemporary issues of Christianity in Africa.



Rodrick Kapwa is an independent researcher in African theology and religious studies based in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo. He holds a Master of Arts in Bible and Theology and is currently pursuing further theological studies at the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Brussels (FUTP). His research interests include African theology, contemporary transformations of Christianity, and ecclesial dynamics in Africa.

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