The Legacy of Byang Kato

Keith Ferdinando

Almost thirty years since his premature death cut short an outstandingly promising ministry, Byang Kato’s contribution to the growth of African evangelical Christianity remains unique. His book Theological Pitfalls in Africa, translated into French as Pièges théologiques en Afrique, still provokes comment and controversy, as it has done since its publication in 1975. In recent years the Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology has published accounts of his life and work by Christina Breman (1996) and Yusufu Turaki (2001). The Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology named its chapel after him, as did the Faculte de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui its library, appropriate recognition of his role in the foundation of both institutions. The idea that he was “the founding father of modern African evangelical theology” is no exaggeration, readily justified by an appraisal of recent African church history.1

Byang Henry Kato was born in June 1936 into the Hahm, or Jaba, people in the Nigerian town of Kwoi in Kaduna State. His parents were adherents of Jaba traditional religion, but Byang was converted to Christ at the age of twelve in a primary school of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). He subsequently went to Igbaja Bible College, gained British secondary school certificates by correspondence, and in 1966 was awarded a London University bachelor of divinity degree after three years of study at London Bible College. He returned to Igbaja as professor from 1966 to 1967 and, at the age of thirty-one, became general secretary of the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) in 1967. He undertook postgraduate studies at Dallas Theological Seminary in the early 1970s, obtaining the degrees master of sacred theology and doctor of theology. In 1973 he was appointed general secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM, now the Association of Evangelicals of Africa), the second incumbent of that position and the first African to hold it. He drowned just two years later, aged thirty-nine, in a tragic and unexplained swimming accident while on vacation at the Kenyan coast.

Theology

Kato was a pioneer of modern African evangelical scholarship, the first evangelical African Christian to gain a doctoral degree in theology. His literary output was modest, comprising a number of articles, one or two pamphlets, and Theological Pitfalls in Africa, which is the published version of his doctoral thesis. Whatever one’s view of it, Theological Pitfalls was a pioneering work of African evangelical theology, to “be viewed within [the] wider context of Kato’s vision for a positive evangelical theological initiative in Africa.”2 Quite simply, he showed that African theological scholarship need not be the unique preserve of theological liberals, as had seemed to be the case.

In this connection Kato’s swift acceptance of the notion of contextualization was particularly significant. The provenance of the word itself, first employed in 1972 by Shoki Coe in the World Mission in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund, made it suspect to many evangelicals.3 Kato, however, recognized its importance for the well-being of the African church and believed that it did not imply compromising any of the theological principles that he considered fundamental. His approach ensured that mainstream African evangelicalism should not become entrenched in an obscurantist and contextually irrelevant fundamentalism. Theological Pitfalls itself, as well as many of his articles, addressed some of the issues of the Africa of the 1970s and are themselves early moves toward a contextual approach.

Certainly Kato’s understanding of contextualization reflected his time. His approach may not have had the theoretical basis and subtlety of those who followed, and Theological Pitfalls is, as Paul Bowers points out, “a ‘maiden effort’ . . . his first major publication . . . an initial contribution,” rather than the “magnum opus” that might have followed, but for his early death.4 Nevertheless, his book and articles remain exemplary in at least two respects. First, his intention was truly to contextualize the Gospel for Africans: he addressed African issues, and most of what he wrote was published in Africa. In contrast, Parratt has noted “the tendency of some African scholars to write and publish with a Western, rather than an African, audience in mind . . . to publish their work exclusively in the West . . . and with an eye to the plaudits of Western academics rather than to the usefulness of their work to the African church.”5 Second, Kato’s theological activity aimed at a much broader African readership than just the theological cognoscenti. He avoided the trap that besets much Western theology, that of academic theologians producing works of scholarship for one another that are inaccessible to outsiders. As Kato himself said, “I am fully in favour of the ever-abiding gospel being expressed within the context of Africa, for Africans to understand.”6 His concern was for the church and the fulfillment of its calling in the world, rather than the approbation of the academy. Despite his many criticisms of Kato’s work, Bediako pays gracious tribute to the essentially practical and pastoral concerns that motivated it, describing him as “practical, wise and pastorally concerned” and speaking of his “essentially practical mind.” He is, says Bediako, “most helpful on issues related to the impact of Christian commitment and discipleship on what is ‘considered good and beneficial in marriage in African society.’”7

Polemic

Nevertheless, to a considerable extent Kato’s significance lies in the polemical nature of much of his writing. Theological Pitfalls is itself a polemic, responding to what he saw as a rising tide of universalism and syncretism within African theology and church. These trends he identified particularly in the works of John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu, and in the ecumenical movement as embodied in the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). His principal concern was to insist on the radical discontinuity between the Gospel and African traditional religions—or indeed any non-Christian religion—in response to approaches that suggested an essential continuity between them. Briefly, he responded to the inclusivist tendency of some contemporary African theologians with exclusivist arguments adapted to the African context.

Theological Pitfalls is not without weaknesses. Bowers refers

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to its “angularity” and “limitations,” noting that “the analysis is not always accurate, the polemic not always just, the demonstration not always persuasive, the organization not always clear.”\(^8\) Such criticisms do not of themselves negate the essential validity of Kato’s case. Nevertheless, Parratt claims that Kato stirred controversy unnecessarily: “It would probably be true to say that although the dominant tradition in African Protestant Christianity remains broadly conservative, the lines are much less sharply drawn than in the West. In this respect Kato introduced into the debate in Africa a largely foreign controversy.”\(^9\) The criticism begs some basic questions. If indeed the lines were not sharply drawn, perhaps some clarification was necessary, not in order to introduce a “foreign controversy” but to focus issues that the church needed to face, rather than evade, for the sake of its own well-being. From this perspective Kato’s role was the prophetic one of confronting a theological trend that in his view threatened the future of vital Christianity in Africa. Paul similarly reproved churches he himself had founded, introducing what might equally be termed “largely foreign” controversies to confront serious declension. Nor was Christ a stranger to such polemic.

By his opposition to the AACC and theologians like Mbiti and Idowu, Kato was taking on the African ecclesiastical and theological establishment. He disagreed in print with those whose academic credentials were already established, risking opprobrium and ridicule. Bowers notes that “some reaction was vicious”; he reported that “a prominent religious newspaper in Eastern Africa ran a review which called Pitfalls ‘alarmist in what it says and colonial in the perspective in which it is written.’”\(^10\) Kato was accused of being a tool “in the preservation and protection of neo-colonial interests,” an accusation echoed in later critiques.\(^10\) He was probably aware of the likely reaction to his critique of fellow African theologians, but his refusal to remain silent encouraged the numerically large but theologically diffident African evangelical movement to find its voice and articulate its own distinctive vision. He became a model for those who would follow.

Moreover, his polemic received additional impetus from another quarter, for he saw the threat of syncretism not only in contemporary theology but also in the growth of politically inspired movements of opposition to the church within some postcolonial African states.\(^11\) One such state was Chad, where there was outright persecution of Christians who refused to participate in traditional initiation ceremonies. The Zairian church was also under pressure from the government-inspired movement of authentï¿½citï¿½, although it did not experience the physical persecution that took place in Chad. Kato supported the stand of Chadian Christians who endured suffering rather than participate in traditional initiation rites. There is a clear correspondence between what they were facing and the controversy he was engaged in, for the Chadian government’s attempt to force the church into a syncretistic accommodation with African tradition paralleled what Kato believed to be taking place more subtly at the theological level. The theological trend he was resisting did indeed have the potential to undermine the principled stand of Chadian believers, by implying that the rites of traditional religion might be grafted onto Christian practice without theological loss. Thus, by resisting what he saw as theological syncretism, Kato was simultaneously providing the Chadian church with a reasoned theological basis for its resistance to a state-imposed syncretism. Juxtaposing the two issues helps to explain the
insistence, even the passion, with which he stated his position, and the urgent priority, in his view, of a polemical theological approach as opposed, perhaps, to a more creative one.

It has been suggested that Kato changed his position shortly before his death. In *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, Mbiti claims that Kato’s attack on himself and Idowu “arose partly out of insufficient understanding on his part,” and that Mbiti discussed the issues with Kato on December 9, 1975, a little over a week before his death. “At the end he apologized for having unjustifiably attacked me, and promised to rewrite and change the relevant parts of the book [*Pitfalls*]. . . . I assume, he would have made personal apologies to those others whom he had attacked.” The story that Kato had apologized for the charge of incipient syncretism was circulating long before *Bible and Theology* was published, and Bowers, one of those who knew him personally, refers to it: “Kato’s friends were deeply upset at this report, which they knew to be untrue and which they felt attempted to emasculate at a stroke the heart of Kato’s critique, at a time when Kato, conveniently enough, could no longer respond and set the record straight.” Bower claims, rather, that, “in response to objections from Mbiti, Kato apologized for the wording of certain passages in [*Pitfalls*], and undertook to make adjustments accordingly in two paragraphs in the book. . . . Kato made no deathbed recantations! He was still growing, but he was not changing directions.” It is indeed unlikely that Kato would so quickly have moderated his position on the basis of a single conversation with Mbiti, especially given the conviction that his writings demonstrate. Such changes as he made seem to have been few and minor, and they had no impact on the thrust of his argument.

**Controversy**

Kato’s literary corpus, and especially *Theological Pitfalls*, continues to provoke controversy. Perhaps the most frequent criticism focuses on an alleged surrender to a Western theological agenda over against a distinctively African approach. Oduyoye’s assessment is representative in both content and tone: “The rejection [of the] African worldview by an African shows how successful the Christian missions were in alienating Africans from their ‘Africanness.’”

What is principally in view in these criticisms is his negative evaluation of African traditional religion and his consequent rejection of any substantive role for it in the formulation of an African Christian theology. This position is seen by his critics as a rejection of African culture, which would ipso facto eliminate all possibility of an African theology at anything but a superficial level. He failed, says Parratt, “to make allowance for the fact that throughout its history Christianity has had to come to terms with the cultures in which it has been implanted.” Bediako offers the most developed critique, arguing that Kato’s insistence on the exclusive role of the Bible as a revelation of salvation, coupled with his negative appraisal of African traditional religion, blinded him to the possibility that God may be working redemptively among those who have, or had, no access to the Bible. He critiques Kato’s conception of the Gospel as being ultimately “acultural,” “a further dimension of his exclusivist Biblicism.” For Kato, he says, “no cultural factors had any part in the shaping of one’s understanding of the Christian faith.” Criticism has also extended to his rejection of “the politicisation of African theological thought to deal with issues of social injustice and
Certainly Kato was committed to certain nonnegotiable presuppositions that were foundational in his thinking. Fundamental among them was the belief that the Bible was the unique Word of God, the ultimate source and authority for all legitimate theological expression, including African. Such a view will of course be problematic to those who do not hold it, but it has a venerable pedigree, and not only in the West. Not the least aspect of that pedigree is the fact that both implicitly and explicitly the Scriptures themselves repeatedly insist on their own uniquely divine origin and consequent authority. Kato further believed that a biblical understanding of the Gospel entailed an exclusivist approach toward other religions. Again, commitment to such a stance does not imply subservience to a Western agenda, any more than does the adoption of an opposing inclusivist (or even pluralist) stance, which has equally strong roots within the Western theological tradition.

Kato indeed studied in the West and was undoubtedly influenced by Western thinking, but such an observation is no less true of his critics. Dependence is all but inevitable in any academic field, for we stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. This truism does not of itself invalidate any particular approach toward other religions. Again, commitment to such a stance does not imply subservience to a Western agenda, any more than does the adoption of an opposing inclusivist (or even pluralist) stance, which has equally strong roots within the Western theological tradition.

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Kato believed there had to be a radical break with traditional belief, in favor, not of Western theology, but of the Gospel itself.

Nor was Kato silent about social and political issues. Interviewed by Christianity Today, a journal addressed to the American public, he spoke in a way that many of its readers would have found uncongenial: "We must appreciate the call for a kind of socialism because capitalism has become a real curse in Africa and the gap between the haves and the have-nots continues to widen. In Africa today you will find many millionaires but also many people who go to bed hungry." Elsewhere he condemned the past oppression of African peoples, writing that "enslavement of Africans by whites is probably the worst evil done by one class of people to another." In the same article he condemned the racial discrimination then being practiced in Southern Rhodesia, South Africa, and the United States, and continued, "While I do not agree with the proponents of Black Theology . . . I fully identify myself with their condemnation of injustice. The search for human dignity is a Scriptural principle." His quarrel with some contemporary theological approaches to sociopolitical issues was not with their concern for justice but grew from his belief that they confused the fruit of salvation with its substance, which was the thrust of his critique of the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1976.
the field. The church in Africa and elsewhere is the only agent for sowing the seed.”

Most significantly, he used his position to promote the cause of theological education within the evangelical constituency. He knew that evangelical churches lagged behind others in theological development, the result, to some extent at least, of a suspicion of higher theological education on the part of some of their missionary founders. Turaki refers to Kato’s “difficulties in persuading SIM and ECWA of the need for higher education and quality leadership training.” What made the need increasingly urgent was the huge growth of the church, coupled with rapid social change across Africa that was producing an increasingly urban population and a growing middle class. Evangelicalism would not flourish unless its leadership was able to respond effectively to the issues confronting the church in the postcolonial era. Kato thus highlighted the need to expand, deepen, and strengthen “every possible means of teaching the church,” “particularly at the highest leadership levels,” and sought to move ahead in a number of areas.

First, and most crucial, was the establishment of institutions of advanced theological education by the AEAM itself. He argued that francophone Africa should be given the priority, as the English-speaking countries already had far more seminaries and Bible schools. Plans were therefore laid for the foundation of a theological school in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, a vision that materialized in 1977 with the Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de Bangui. Subsequently a parallel anglophone institution was founded in Nairobi, the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, which received its first students in 1983. These have become training institutions of critical importance for the evangelical African church.

Second, Kato proposed raising standards in existing evangelical institutions through a theological accrediting agency. He was working on this project shortly before his death, and it became a reality in 1976 when the AEAM formally constituted the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa. He also hoped to see the establishment of an evangelical theological journal for the whole of Africa and an association of evangelical theologians. None of this was the vision of a man wedded to a Western agenda and indifferent or opposed to a distinctively African theology.

Finally, less visible perhaps than the establishment of such institutions but no less significant—and still remembered fondly by many—was the warm personal encouragement and help he gave to aspiring younger African theologians, passing on his vision for the growth to theological maturity of the African church. “Through his vision and wide personal contacts [he] formatively impacted the following generation of African evangelical leadership.”

Byang Kato was only thirty-nine when he died. The work of his relatively brief life was seminal in the development of evangelical theology in Africa through the example of his own scholarship, the visionary initiatives that led to the foundation of enduring institutions, and the encouragement of the rising generation. He set the agenda for African evangelicalism, and according to Tite Tiénou, it is still largely his vision that “provides the basic framework for such strategy as a whole in our continent.” Since his death he has been harshly and unjustly criticized, but Kato was no pawn of missionaries or of Western parachurch bodies, nor was he a neocolonial spokesman of Western theology. He was a “twentieth century prophet, somewhat in the school of an earlier African, Tertullian, for while he identified with black Africa in its cry for liberation against unjust oppression, he was fearless in his denunciation of all liberal theology and philosophy that deviated from the authority of the Bible as the Word of God.” The goal of his work was to advance the ambition vibrantly expressed in his famed rallying cry, “Let African Christians be Christian Africans!” It is not only a fitting epitaph but also a continuing challenge to the African church today.

Kato promoted theological education within the evangelical constituency.

Notes

11. See, for example, Kato, African Cultural Revolution, pp. 22–24.
16. Bediako, Theology and Identity, p. 413.
18. See Bediako, Theology and Identity, p. 391.
23. Ibid., p. 30.
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Works About Byang Kato


