



The Crucible of Faith: Justice and Liberation in the Work of Engelbert Mveng

by Akintunde E. Akinade

For when language is seriously interfered with, when it is disjoined from truth... horrors can descend again on mankind.

Chinua Achebe

The church's role as the voice of the voiceless is extremely dangerous... It has made many of us martyrs.

Fr. Prosper Abega

We cannot become the inheritors or administrators of a Christianity that simply continues on its way, passing by the victim lying in the ditch (Luke 10:30-32). How can a *credible* Christianity be created while so many factors are tightening a noose around Africa's neck? This is a decisive question.

Jean-Marc Éla

Introduction: Speaking Truth to Power

This paper examines the thought of Engelbert Mveng, a Cameroonian artist, philosopher, historian, theologian, poet, an ordained Catholic priest, and the founder of the Movement of African Catholic Intellectuals (M.I.C.A.). He led a vigorous fight for the liberation of every day people, was labeled as an irredentist by many powerful forces in the country and was brutally murdered in his own home after celebrating mass in 1995. It seems to me that his theological vocation provides a useful lens for understanding the relevance of the Christian faith within the African continent. Among African church leaders, no one has done this with greater authority of historical and theological pro-

fundity as Mveng. He was an African Christian intellectual who unrelentingly brought his largeness of mind and soul to bear on the African condition and predicament. His writings required that we get beneath the surface of scholarship--- its facile and often superficial assumptions--- and engage the various human responses to the unsavoury circumstances that people experience in many countries in Africa. He brought a particularly vigorous style to his critical reflections on the relevance of the Christian faith in Africa. He was an African Christian intellectual who wrestled with the meaning of gospel within the African context. His academic training in the Congo, Louvain, Paris, and Lyons equipped him with the necessary tools to engage issues that were relevant to theological discourse in Africa.

Mveng's advocacy for a prophetic Christianity in Africa challenges the form of Christianity that is uncommitted to the plight of the poor and supports the status quo. His vision underscores a form of Christianity that affirms the yearnings of the people to breathe free in the midst of oppression, injustice, and terror. Africa's social, cultural, economic, and political realities demand a prophetic paradigm that confronts the forces of death that perpetuate oppression. Uncompromising and unrelenting in his call for an *ecclesia reformada*, Mveng's theology takes into consideration the circumstances and challenges of the African context. It is also a theology that is oriented towards a future that is replete with positive transformations in church and society.

The Theology of the People

Africa's theology of liberation takes the circumstances and conditions of African people seriously. It is a theological exercise that stems from praxis and critical engagement with the conditions that put people in bondage and oppression. The experience of the people become the *fons et origo* (source and origin) for theological reflection and engagement. This theological orientation is deeply rooted in the ghettos of human experience and condition. It is sustained by faith and by the constant yearning of the people to experience some of the aspects of the abundant life. Jesus' prophetic proclamations were not mere rhetorics deployed to pacify the political elites of his time; rather, they were courageous affirmations of the liberative power of the Gospel. This understanding of the Gospel is a constant motif in the works of Mveng. His understanding of the themes of justice and contextual application provide appropriate perspectives for understanding the essence of the Christian faith within the African context. According to him, African theology

"expresses the faith and hope of our oppressed people. It illustrates the experience of the living Christian communities in Africa. It is therefore not an academic theology, even if some of its promoters move in university circles."¹

When people raise eyebrows about the linguistic medium of this theological engagement, Mveng responded that

"When the objection is made that this theology is not written in native languages, we reply that it is lived in native languages, in the villages and in the neighbourhoods, before being translated into foreign languages by its own rightful heirs, the African theologians."²

This radical epistemological break with the traditional method of doing theology resonates with theologians from the third world. These theologians place a lot of emphasis on their close connections with the "grassroots ecclesial communities." In the words of the Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff,

"Liberation theology had defined another place in which theology is 'done': not so much the university or institute and more the community and in service to the community... Those who do this theology are not so much individual theologians as the communities who bring their problems, solutions, actions and thinking to be taken up and worked on by theologians."³

The theology of the people affirms the dignity of African people in the midst of anthropological annihilation which Mveng described as more frightening than anthropological impoverishment. Anthropological poverty "consists in despoiling human beings not only of what they have, but everything that constitutes their being and essence ---- their identity, history, ethnic roots, language, culture, faith, creativity, dignity, pride, ambitions, right to speak."⁴ The African Report further echoed some of the sentiments in this analysis:

“The social underdevelopment of Africa represents a fundamental aspect of the anthropological pauperization of the African person. If we define pauperization as the fact of becoming poor, namely being deprived of all that we have acquired, all that we are and all that we can do, we shall recognize that Africa is subjugated to structures which result in complete pauperization: political, economic, and social. When it is not a matter of being deprived of all that we own, but rather of all that we are--- our dignity, our rights, our hopes, and our plans--- then pauperization becomes anthropological. It then affects religious and cultural life at its very roots.”⁵

The Currents of Contextualization

The theme of contextualization is a very useful heuristic tool for understanding the strident stirrings of theological autonomy and creativity that features prominently in the work of Mveng. Contextualization takes seriously the environment and context in which the Gospel is appropriated and interpreted. In the words of Regunta Yesurathnam:

“The term contextualization includes all that is implied in indigenization or inculturation, but also seeks also to include the realities of contemporary secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice.... Contextualization both extends and corrects the older terminology. While indigenization tends to focus on the purely cultural dimension of human experience, contextualization broadens the understanding of culture to include social, political, and economic questions. In this way, culture is understood in more

dynamic and flexible ways, and is seen not as closed and self-contained, but as open and able to be enriched by an encounter with other cultures and movements.”⁶

By focusing on contextualization, Mveng presented a bold critic of western arrogance and imperialism even in theological matters. He makes the claim that the West cannot speak for others when it comes to issues of faith. Mveng urged African theologians to move away from the tyranny of dogma and embrace a theological construct that speaks to the real experience of the people. In his reflection on the future of African theology, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, a Jesuit theologian from Nigeria concluded that “the challenge facing theology lies in the extent and manner in which it speaks authentically and credibly to our experience today... we must continue to interpret, deepen, and appropriate for our day and age the meaning and implications of the word that became flesh and lived among us.”⁷ Theologians must avoid the false dichotomy between theory and practice, reflection and action, word and praxis. By thinking about the context of faith, African theologians can re-define the meaning of faith, orthodoxy, and expand the framework of theological thinking. It is a task that calls for diligent discernment, rigorous reflection, meaningful engagement, and careful contemplation. For Mveng, theology is thought and speech about God that is generated out of historical and cultural situations. The discourse about God in Africa cannot be separated from the

African historical experience and the advocacy for justice and liberation.

Mveng cautioned Western theologians to be wary of the temptation to speak for other people. The notion that theology is always contextual cannot be treated with disdain by theologians. In fact, when theology is divorced and disengaged from human experience and context, it becomes utterly deceptive and vacuous. Paul Ricoeur has instructed us that “there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon of exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation.”⁸ The need to do theology from the underside of history led to the formation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians. EATWOT is an association of men and women committed with the struggle for the liberation of Third World peoples by promoting new paradigms of theology for social justice and peace. EATWOT members take the Third World context seriously. They offer an alternative voice for the marginalized and exploited people of the world. They also stress the active agency of the colonized and the oppressed as historical actors in the formation of their own religious, social, and political structures.

Mveng rejected the notion of a universal theology. He disapproved of theological arguments that pretend to give monopoly to Western intellectual perspectives in Christian theology. For him, universal theology is a product of Western fantasies and simply represents the penchant of the West to control and manipulate academic discourse.

Beyond Empire: Christianity in Post-Colonial Africa

Mveng’s theological reflection provide a critical perspective for understanding the role of the gospel in relation to the discourse on liberation and justice in Africa. Through his theology of holistic engagement, he was able to identify and address issues that are germane to the African context. He was a Christian intellectual who consistently wrestled with the African existential condition and crafted an African theology of liberation. My thesis is that Mveng’s theology of liberation provides more comprehensive perspective for understanding the depths of the struggle for liberation in Africa. In conjunction with other theologians like Jean Marc Éla, Eboussi Boulaga, and Meinrad Hebga from Cameroon, he made a compelling case for the relevance of the Christian message within the African context. His perspective on the quest for anthropological dignity resonates with theologians from South Africa such as Simon Maimela, Takatso Mofokeng, Desmond Tutu, Itulemeng Mosala, Bonganjalo Goba, Allan Boesak, and Manas Buthelezi. Mveng offered a caustic critique of theologies and Christian practices that legitimize social systems of oppression and constructed suffering and argued for a praxis-oriented African theology that challenges the status quo. African theologians within the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians have affirmed that:

“Among the Third World continents, Africa appears essentially as a land of domination and exploitation, quar-

tered, torn apart, divided, atomized, trampled under foot. It is the continent where frequently the people have no dignity, no rights, and no hope. These challenges are becoming more intolerable considering that natural catastrophes—which are desperately repeated—are added to evils caused by human mischief and injustice.”⁹

By drawing his inspiration from a biblical theological vision which portrays God as the liberator of the oppressed, Mveng provided an alternative theological vision that can resist the extreme demands of what he described as “anti-evangelical” forces. Mveng’s theological perspective encourages and empowers oppressed people to become the subjects of their own liberation and creators of just and humane social structures. Mveng used a sound hermeneutics of suspicion to unmask the reality of oppression and the ideological mechanisms that underpin and morally justify the social forces that foster and perpetuate the domination of African people.

Towards a New and Credible Ecclesiology

Mveng affirmed that a sound understanding of the church must begin with sociological analysis of how the church relates to the realities such as poverty and social class. Social analysis helps identify the church’s implication and complicity in the evils of the world. It is important for churches and their members to continuously ask whether their ways of living and operating in the world point in the direction of God’s reign of justice and love or basically conform to

sinful ways of the world. The church must also be a community of liberation. The responsibility falls upon the church as a nurturing haven of freedom within an oppressive society and as a community dedicated to transforming that oppressive society. Mveng called on the church to engage in a radical reassessment of the political and economic order and structures of sin within the African continent. In order to be the harbinger of new life and hope in Africa, the church must become a credible agent of change. In light of the plethora of problems that African Christians have to contend with, the church must become the voice of the voiceless and the beacon of hope for the hopeless. In his reflection on the future of Christianity in America, Cornel West makes a distinction between prophetic Christianity and Constantinian Christianity.¹⁰ Prophetic Christianity valorizes the subversive spirit that seeks to unveil the forces of injustice and oppression in the world. Constantinian Christianity on the other hand exhibits all the oppressive trappings of empire and imperial hegemonic order. It is characterized by an insidious justification of oppressive ideologies. Mveng affirmed that such framework for domination is sustained by grand deception and duplicity. According to him,

“it is a discourse that claims to tell the truth and produces lies, that claims to speak life and produces death, that claims to speak freedom and produces oppression, that claims to speak equality and produces inequalities, that claims to utter justice and produces injustices.”¹¹

Mveng urged the churches in Africa to confront and challenge all the forces of lies and chicanery that have contributed to the pillage and exploitation of the African continent. The church must present an agenda of unalloyed commitment to justice and liberation. In the words of Jean-Marc Éla, "only a church in solidarity with these men and women around us who have been left 'half-dead' (Luke 10:30), stripped by so many mechanisms of pillage and exploitation, can restore all its relevancy to our faith in Jesus Christ in today's Africa."¹²

The Courage and Power to Hope

The gospel of Jesus Christ is essentially about hope, justice, love, and liberation. The Christian gospel affirms that the goal of solidarity is to participate in the ongoing process of liberation through which human beings can become active agents in the realization of the reign of God. The main obstacle to this prophetic vision is our estrangement from God and from one another. This estrangement has been described in theological circles as both personal and structural sin. Mveng recognized these two dimensions of sin in his own theological analysis. He believed that in order for African people to win the constant battle against injustice, sin, and oppression, they have to tap into the best resources in their culture and within the Christian tradition. African communities are based on what Kwesi Dickson has described as "communal equilibrium." According to him:

"A society (community) is in equilibrium when its customs are maintained, its goals attained and spirit powers given regular and adequate recognition. Members of society (community) are expected to live and act in such a way as to promote society's (community's) well-being; to do otherwise is to court disaster, not only for the individual actor but for the (community) as a whole. Any act that detracts from the soundness of a (community) is looked upon with disfavour, and (the community) takes remedial measures to reverse the evil consequences set in motion."¹³

The African philosophy and ethos of *Ubuntu* (humanity) undergirds the African ideal of community and mutual interdependence. Community and connectedness undergird the African mode of seeing and being in the world. To be fully human is to live in community and work for the total well-being of that community. Although Western industrial capitalism has eroded some aspects of the traditional African sense of community, there must be a renewed effort to regain and reclaim the African model of redemptive harmony. Mveng believed that a new sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) must be well grounded in African traditional ideas and ethos. This was an important aspect of his theological creativity and conviction.

Mveng also maintained that God is always with the oppressed in the fight against injustice. In Jesus Christ, God takes sides with the forgotten and faceless people of the world. In Christ, God provides the power of life over death. "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Jesus Christ is the

embodiment of God's justice. Jesus affirmed in words and praxis that the primary purpose of his mission in the world was to give life in abundance and fullness to everyone. Jesus came into the world to bring dignity to the outcast, to set free the oppressed, and to fight the forces of darkness. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). The cross symbolizes the clash with the powers of this world. It also reveals the battle between the world system of exploitation that inevitably creates constructed suffering and the kingdom of God--- a confrontation that becomes liberating for the poor and the oppressed. In the words of Jean-Marc Éla, "nothing can blind us to the brutal fact: *Africa today is crucified*. An African theology that rereads the Bible in terms of this fundamental locus will have to be a theology of the cross."¹⁴ Mveng believed that African liberation theology is anchored in the amazing assurance that the power of God will overcome and dismantle the principalities and powers of this world. He called for a radical faith that compels people to transcend their selfish agendas and engage in the liberation of the poor and ordinary people. It is imperative for the Christian community to be at the center of the struggle against the wretched of the earth. The Christian faith, which is a gift of God's grace, must go beyond the soporific solidarity with the victims of injustice and become the quintessential expression of resistance against fatalism, misery, and death.

Any Christian theologian is compelled to ask an important question:

What's the role of the good news amid the situation of injustice and misery? Is it possible to envisage or conceptualize any symphony of hope out of the cacophony of terror within the African continent? Mveng advocated a theology of hope in spite of the horrendous experiences that challenge people's dignity and wholeness. This perspective is not a fatalistic eschatological hope expressed in the by and by. On the contrary, it is grounded in the subversive joy that compelled him to work for the transformation of the society in the here and now. This is a form of realized eschatology that connects to the hopes and aspirations of the people. The bold declaration concerning the Kingdom of God that is proclaimed in the Beatitudes affirms a vision of justice, love, peace, and wellbeing. It deals with a new dispensation that must be inaugurated in the here and now. It is not about sullen resignation or forlorn expectation; rather, it is the fulfillment of justice and liberation for all. The spirituality of the Beatitudes challenges the wanton oppression and injustice that reduce the children of God to mere commodities and objects of corrosive derision. According to Mveng,

"The poor of the Beatitudes are not blessed because they are poor, but because the Reign of God is theirs (Matt. 5:1-12). The Lord has not come to institutionalize and beatify misery, but to deliver us from it. That is what Zechariah sings at the beginning of St. Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:68-79), that is what the Magnificat proclaims (Luke 1:47-55), that is what the charter of the Beatitudes promulgates (Matt. 5:1-12), and that is what the Lord himself

reveals in the synagogue at Nazareth, as he inaugurates his public ministry (Luke 4: 18-20).”¹⁵

Conclusion: A Clarion Call for Mutuality

Mveng provided a unique analysis of the African reality. As a student of history, he had an acute awareness of the toxic legacy of colonialism in Africa. His philosophical perspective provided a nuanced understanding of the existential absurdities within the African continent. His theological convictions allowed him to speak and write with prophetic acumen. His poetic sensibilities allowed him to write like a sage with deep convictions. He was not interested in leading his readers into the darkest labyrinths of abstract theological ideas; rather, he advocated for a theological engagement with concrete issues and matters that affect people on a daily basis.

On a critical note, Mveng’s tendency to isolate the African experience from other global experiences may raise some concerns and questions. He overlooked the connections and affinities that African people share with other groups of people. His work would definitely benefit from a dialogue with other important advocates of Liberation Theology from other perspectives. For instance, his writings failed to take into account how African feminist theologians have grappled with the issues of poverty and justice within the African context. This point underscores the fact that the African landscape is fraught with ambiguities and complexities. It does not lend itself to easy generalizations. It is extremely important for Afri-

can theologians to find areas of affinity and solidarity with other peoples from all over the globe that are experiencing various forms of injustice, alienation, and oppression. In his reflection on the African reality, Kwame Anthony Appiah said that “we will only solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a special situation, and we shall not solve them if we see them as African problems, generated by our being somehow unlike others.”¹⁶

Whatever the questions we may raise about his work, no one can dismiss his profound contributions to decolonizing theology within the African context and his efforts to make the African religious heritage and the Christian faith come together in a meaningful, enriching, and deeply satisfying way. Mveng’s thought underscored the importance of indigenous agency, the capacity of Africans for self-affirmation, and the recognition of the collective humanity of African people. He weaved together historical, theological, and philosophical categories in his tireless effort to create an African Theology of liberation. His interdisciplinary approach expands the frontiers of theological thinking and adds more depth to the discipline. The task of responding to Africa’s complex realities and understanding the public role of African Christianity calls for our continuous interdisciplinary reflections and collective wisdom. His thought and writings on African theology compel us to be wary of facile dichotomies that may prevent us from understanding Africa’s holistic reality and context. His theological engagement maintains veritable connections between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, theory and action, re-

flection and actual involvement with the concrete concerns of oppressed people. Mveng's theology of the people is also a telling testimony to the fact that an experience of faith that holds itself aloof from people fighting to escape the horrors of injustice poses a grave risk to

the future of Christianity in Africa. The creative paradigms of a prophetic theology in Africa must not be considered as abstract theological rhetorics, but as veritable tools for instituting the reign of God here on earth.

Notes

- 1 Engelbert Mveng, "African Liberation Theology," in *Third World Theologies—Convergences and Differences*, eds. Leonardo Boff and Virgilio Elizondo (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 18.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Leonardo Boff, "What are Third World Theologies?," in *Third World Theologies—Convergences and Differences*, eds. Leonardo Boff & Virgilio Elizondo *op. cit.*, 13.
- 4 See *Irruption of the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 220.
- 5 The "African Report" in *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences*, ed. K.C. Abraham, ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 47.
- 6 See Charles Van Engen, "Toward a Contextually Appropriate Methodology in Mission Theology," in *Appropriate Christianity* ed. Charles H. Craft (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 194.
- 7 Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 152-153.
- 8 Paul Ricoeur quoted in Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 54. Ricoeur also defined interpretation as "an exercise of suspicion" in his *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32-36.
- 9 The "African Report" in *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* ed. K.C. Abraham, *op. cit.*, 28.
- 10 See Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 147-150.
- 11 Engelbert Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," in *Paths of African Theology* ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 154.
- 12 Jean-Marc Éla, "Christianity and Liberation in Africa," in *Paths of African Theology*, Rosino Gibellini, ed. *op. cit.*, 151.
- 13 Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 62.
- 14 Jean-Marc Éla, "Christianity and Liberation in Africa" in *Paths of African Theology* ed. Rosino Gibellini, *op. cit.*, 146.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 163.
- 16 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 136.