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*The Impact of the African Renaissance on
Theological Education in Africa –
A Perspective from Zimbabwe*

Journal of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre
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The Impact of the African Renaissance on Theological Education in Africa - A Perspective from Zimbabwe

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Themes of future issues:

Vol. 7, No. 1 (June 2004)

The Church in Africa: Historical Consciousness and Patterns of Engagement

Vol. 7, No. 2 (December 2004)

Muslims and Christians in African Perspective



Editorial

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The articles in this issue are revised versions of papers presented at a conference of Zimbabwean theologians, held at the Theological College of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo, from 5 to 9 January 2003. Held under the auspices of the African Theological Fellowship (ATF) and the Association of Colleges for Theological Education in Zimbabwe (ACTEZ), the conference was a direct outflow of the continent-wide conference of the ATF, held at Grand Bassam, Côte d'Ivoire, in September 2001, on the theme: 'A Christian vision for the African Renaissance'.

During the Grand Bassam conference, the sub-regions of the ATF were encouraged to pursue study processes within each sub-region that would develop a local focus on the concerns and issues raised in the search for a recovery of the best of the African past, to connect with the present and point a way into the future. The expectation was that these indigenous resources would make a unique and decisive impact on the shaping of the curriculum of theological education in Africa. (The papers from the conference in Grand Bassam were published in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (December 2001).

Although several of the papers presented at the Zimbabwe conference could not be reproduced in this issue, the majority of them are included. (The complete list of papers and presenters can be found in the 'Plan of Action and Commitments' - pp. 51-52.) Together they give a fair indication of the theological ferment that is now beginning in theological institutions in Zimbabwe, largely as a result of the wider discussion that has been taking place within the ATF. It is significant that no less than fourteen theological institutions and churches were represented, covering the whole spectrum of theological education, from church- and mission-sponsored Bible colleges to university departments of Theology and Religious Studies.

The concern of the ATF for some years now has been for the growth of an authentic African Christianity in which the Christian gospel engages fully with African cultural, social, economic and political realities. Its aim is to help to undergird the process of Christian expansion with adequate theological reflection and depth of Christian scholarship, and to develop and promote the tools and the methods to sustain it. Theological institutions have potentially a key role in providing a solid foundation for such reflection and scholarship, as well as directly promoting new initiatives in research and engagement.

The articles in this issue need to be read in the light of the peculiar missionary and settler legacy in Zimbabwe and the situation of theological oppression that has obtained in Zimbabwe until quite recently. Some of the articles refer to this situation more or less pointedly, and it may be difficult for African Christians from elsewhere on the continent, or for Christians from other

continents, to take in the extent of the imposition of Western culture-Christianity in Zimbabwe and the stranglehold of Western theology. This has been particularly marked in the evangelical churches and theological institutions which, for a long time, did not have the freedom to explore the cultural and other contextual issues and concerns that were the focus of theological reflection elsewhere on the continent. Therefore, that such a conference on such a theme could be initiated by such a representative group of theological institutions in Zimbabwe may be considered as something of a breakthrough for the churches in Zimbabwe.

It is perhaps significant that the Zimbabwe discussion took off from the 'cultural' realities deriving from the colonial and settler legacy, as the foundation stage of coming to terms with and confronting other dimensions of the contextual challenge of Zimbabwe.

The understanding here is that African culture is not a priori a hostile environment, and that African Christians have indigenous resources to draw on in their apprehension of Jesus Christ and in their cultivation of the life of faith. The Living God was not absent from the pre-Christian cultures of Africa, as indicated by the fact that African names for the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ found their way into the mother-tongue versions of the Bible that have been produced in Africa in the last two hundred years or so. If this is the case, then what signs of his working can be discerned in the ancient cultures of Africa, and what new light do these shed on the gospel?

Given the Western pedigree of much that obtains in African theological institutions across the continent, the question then arises as to what might be the shape of a theological formation that is adequate to the needs of the African church in these pioneer areas of the development of African Christian thought - hence the theme of the Zimbabwe conference.

It is clear from many of the articles that the exploration of the African and Zimbabwean contribution to Christian faith is just beginning, as Zimbabwean theologians begin to engage with the mainstream of African (and Black) theology of the past fifty years. At the same time, it is clear from some of the articles and the responses to them that inhibiting factors from the missionary and Western legacy still persist. There is room yet for a growth in confidence among African Christian scholars in Zimbabwe to pursue their own questions as valid concerns for the gospel, with the assurance of eliciting African responses from it.

The mix of contributions from 'black' and 'white' Zimbabwean theological educators in papers and responses, produces some interesting results. It provides an illuminating illustration of how different cultural backgrounds bring to the fore different questions