

# Pushing the Naked Envelop Further

## A Missiological Deconstruction of the Empire and Christianity in Africa

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### Abstract

In re-visiting issues of empire and African Christianity, this article sought to provide a missiological deconstruction of empire and Christianity in Africa, and to draw some missiological lessons that can help shape the agenda of Christianity in Africa moving to the future. Using a liberating praxis of engagement with available literature, this article concluded that the relationship between empire and Christianity is not only historical, but a present reality – it can be traced back from early Christianity, Roman Empire, colonial and imperial era, to post-colonial and independent/democratic Africa. The article discovered that while the empire dominates and enslaves, Christianity in Africa could be liberated to liberate the rest of the world from the stronghold of the empire. Optics – in the form of various hermeneutic lenses – should be used to unmask the empire for what/who it is. The theology of ubuntu and other life-affirming African theologies should be used as liberating tools, not only from the empire but also from the myth that Christianity is a Western religion.

**Key words:** Pushing, Naked truth, Missiological, Deconstruction, Empire, African Christianity, Christian Mission

### 1. Introduction

Christianity in Africa has always thrived in the context of the empire. According to Bate (2013:313), the relationship between the two is a complex dialectic of power and control. Historical dynamics between Christian mission and colonialism (Nkomazana, 2016:30; Pillay, 2018:1), Christian mission and slavery (Amponsah, 2013:431), and Christian mission and apartheid can be cited to demonstrate this. Unlike European Christianity, which is on the decline and leaving Church buildings as white elephants or centres of attraction for tourists in some cases, the growth of Christianity in Africa, in the context of the empire, has been phenomenal (Mashau & Frederiks, 2008:109-110; Henry, 2016:1). The rapid explosion of Christianity in Africa is well documented (Manala, 2013:286; Gifford, 2008:276; Komolafe, 2004:217). This speaks to mainline, independent and Pentecostal-charismatic

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Churches and we can trace this from the 21st century back to the exploration era of the 15th century until Christianity's first centuries in North Africa (Mashau & Frederiks, 2008:110). In addition, "the explosive expansion of Christianity in Africa and Asia during the last two centuries constitutes one of the most remarkable cultural transformations in human history" (Etherington & Maxwell, 2004:194).

However, the growth of Christianity in Africa does not come without challenges (Henry, 2016:1) and criticism. Henry (2016:1) concurs, "Christianity in Africa has resulted in the fastest growing, most controversial, most dynamic and most schismatic Churches in the world." One of the major criticisms recorded has to do with its influence and transforming abilities. According to Simango (2018:1):

There has been a lot of mass conversions (or massive numerical growth), but evidence, growth, and fruits of salvation are few or nowhere to be seen. Hence the expression "a hundred miles wide, but only a few inches deep" has been used to describe Africa Christianity.

Areas of concern include, among others, matters of social justice and marginalisation of the most vulnerable in African communities, political decay, abuse of religion and gullibility of the masses and other social ills in Africa. Speaking in the context of Southern Africa, something that is relevant to the rest of Africa, Simango (2018:1) correctly concluded, "I argue that Christianity has not been fully contextualised in Southern Africa – Christianity has spread widely in southern Africa but it has not fully penetrated into the society and culture of the Africans." It is my hypothesis in this article that one of the contributory factors to this anomaly is the influence of the empire on African Christianity and the inherited influence of Western Christianity and culture.

The notion of an 'inch deep' in African Christianity is a creative chaos given birth by the oppressive, divisive and destructive influence of the empire. The author argues in this article that Christianity in Africa has always lived under the spell of the empire – what Botha (2011:133) calls, "living at the edge of empire." In revisiting, exploring and deconstructing issues of empire and African Christianity, something that has been researched extensively – including the Accra confession, the main question that this article seeks to answer is: What are the missiological lessons that we can draw by unmasking the historical and dynamic interplay between the empire and African Christianity in order to set a missiological agenda for the African Church moving to the future? The aim of this article is, therefore, to provide a missiological deconstruction of empire and Christianity in Africa and to draw missiological lessons that can help shape a missiological agenda for Christian mission and Christianity in Africa moving to the future. To achieve this aim, the author will start by setting the tone through outlining a missiological framework

towards this research, and then move on to provide a literature review on empire and Christianity in Africa, followed by a missiological deconstruction of empire and African Christianity, and then conclude by drawing missiological lessons that can help shape the discourse moving to the future.

## 2. Setting the tone: A missiological framework

The task to unmask the empire in the context of African Christianity is undertaken from a missiological perspective. The author's approach is influenced by two negative realities in the history of Christian mission over centuries, namely the empire has always worked alongside Christian mission in planting Churches in Africa. Secondly, the marriage between the empire and Christian mission has been used to subject Africans under colonialism, slavery (Amponsah, 2013:431) and apartheid (in the case of South) Africa (Oliver 2010:1). Christian mission has always lived under the spell of the empire and its roots can be traced as far back as to early Christianity (Van den Bosch, 2009:648).

Methodologically, the author used a 'liberating praxis of engagement' with relevant literature on this topic to unmask the deceptive and domineering powers of the empire in the context of Christianity in Africa. Speaking in the context of the need to break our violent silences that perpetuate exclusion in urban spaces, De Beer (2014:1) argued for a 'liberating praxis engagement' as follows, "[it] is (still) a necessity in conjunction with and initiated by concrete sites of struggle in order for violent silences to be broken, for the disruptions of the poor to penetrate our numbness, and for the mutual liberation of the poor and of theology to continue." This is premised on encountering missiology as espoused by Kritzing (2008:764) in his praxis matrix that defines missiology as encounterology. In his article *Mission as Prophetic Dialogue*, Klippies Kritzing defines his praxis matrix as, "A missiological approach that discerns contextual priorities [and] consciously integrates the *theology* and *practice* of mission" (Kritzing, 2013:37). The use of liberating praxis of engagement, in this article, is grounded on transforming encounters between the empire and Christianity in Africa; and in this instance, the author will use readily available literature on this topic as interlocutors.

## 3. Literature review on empire and Christianity in Africa

According to Oduyoye (1996:494), "The Church of Christ seems to have found a permanent home in Africa." However, there is doubt with regard to its identity and future. Oduyoye (1996:494) opines, "Much of the Church's history, mission, and theology of the first millennium of Christianity is yet to be properly claimed as African." This is mainly because of the relationship between the empire and Christianity in Africa where Christianity became synonymous with Western Christianity and

culture. Historically, this relationship can be traced back to different epochs of the history of Christianity. Van den Bosch (2009:648) captures this as follows:

The history of Christianity is completely intertwined with the history of various empires. The life of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross shaped the context of the Roman Empire, as is the theology of the apostle Paul; the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, where central doctrinal decisions were taken that shaped Christian theology, were controlled by Roman emperors; the global spread of Christianity as a result of the great missionary enterprises of the sixteenth to the nineteenth century cannot be comprehended apart from the history of the colonial empires of early colonialism (Spain and Portugal) and later colonialism (especially Britain) – in short: Christianity cannot be understood apart from empire.

It is clear from the foregoing that Christianity in Africa has always thrived in the context of the empire. The relationship has always been complex and in some instances ambiguous, and the following can be cited:

### **3.1 Christian Mission and Colonialism**

Christianity in Africa is known for an ugly history of Christian mission and colonialism working together as inseparable bedfellows. In defining the imperialist identity of empire and the misuse of religion to advance its imperialistic agenda, Mothoagae (2011:4) concluded:

One of the fundamental ideologies surrounding empire is that there is a thin line between religion and politics. It is for this reason that one cannot but speak of religion as a political resource. The author argues that religion has legitimated regimes, siphoned potential grievances, provided support for organisation for social movements as well as offering concepts of justice that seek to mobilise participation for change.

The imperialist identity of empire was made manifest by using Christian missionaries to advance the imperialist agenda (Du Bois, 1938:101). Masondo (2018:209) agrees that, “Christianity was meant to be one of the most potent weapons in the armory of European Imperialism. Christian missionaries were used to colonise the conscience (Masondo, 2018:209), expropriate land of indigenous people through armed force (Kritzinger, 1987:17-18), change African names, customs, traditions and religions (Oliver, 2010:4). African ways of knowing and indigenous knowledge systems were replaced by Western education and in the process, the empire committed epistemic genocide in Africa in the name of Western Christianity. Pillay (2018:1) adds, “Missionaries have been seen as playing a major role in undermining the life and culture of indigenous tribes in order to make them victims of easy conquest.”

### 3.2 Christian Mission and Slavery

There has always been a delicate and uneasy interplay, yet contested interplay between race, missions, colonialism, empire and slavery in the history of Christian mission to Africa by European powers (Amponsah, 2013:432). This relationship includes, among others, the use of children to advance the cause of both the empire and the Christian mission. Koonar (2014:72) argues, "Childhood in colonial Ghana can be viewed as a site of contestation between the competing interests of patriarchy, race, and colonial and missionary authority, in which the labor of children was used to achieve a larger degree of control and influence in the region." Elmina and Cape Coast, two 'castles' on the Coast of Ghana remain sites of slavery in Africa and something that reminds us how cruel a Church, and in particular Reformed Christians, can be in terms of turning a blind eye on this crime against humanity (Pillay, 2018:2). However, it should be noted that there are European missionaries who vehemently opposed this relationship (Smit, 2016:5) whilst others strongly supported and defended it (Amponsah, 2013:431; Booth, 2018:159).

### 3.3 Christian Mission and Apartheid

The colonisation of Blacks in South Africa is characterised by various dimensions which vary from land dispossession, political domination, economic dominance (oppression which was capitalist in character), and cultural-religious subjugation (Kritzinger, 1987:17-19). The unfortunate part is that the political forces worked closely with the Christian Church and the Bible was used to subjugate Blacks. "It is especially the missionary activities of the Churches which get the blame for suppressing elements of African culture, e.g. traditional dress, polygamy, ancestor veneration, communal ownership, etc." (Kritzinger 1987:19). Amponsah (2013:438) opines, "Beyond the notion of the superiority of Christianity, however, lies the invention of the illegitimacy of blackness by which Europeans rationalised their racial superiority. As a result, Western Christianity and whiteness became the normative sites of purity against which not only Whites but also some Christianised Blacks measured the putative immorality and immutability of black pathology."

## 4. A missiological deconstruction of empire in the face of Christianity in Africa

### 4.1 Defining the empire

Defining the concept "empire" is complex (Oliver, 2010:2) and its use is controversial to politicians and scholars alike (Boesak, 2009:2). In capturing the complexity of this concept, Meylahn (2011:3) speaks about empire as world-of-meaning. What brings reconciliation to diverse understanding and use of the concept of empire is the issue of power and authority. According to Mothoagae (2011:115), "The epis-

temological explanation of empire finds its origin from the Latin word *imperium* referring to power and authority.” Power defines empire. Oliver (2010:2) argues, “This power takes various different shapes and forms with the major distinction between virtual and actual empires as state or political entities.” This speaks to the Dutch, British and Afrikaner empires in the context of South African history. Oliver (2010:3) notes:

Since 1652, South Africa was part of an empire: the first one and a half century under the economic-driven Dutch company and the next one and a half century under the spatial and cultural driven British Empire. It is not strange then, that the Afrikaners, when they came to power, followed trends [from] these examples in the governing of the country.

However, the empire’s use of power and the manipulation thereof is diverse and broader than just politics – even though the political power is necessary for the empire to advance its course. In defining the scope of engagement with the empire, and with particular focus on the South African context, Boesak (2017:62) remarks:

In the circles of prophetic Reformed theology, theological critique has deepened from a critique on race and religion, apartheid and the theology of apartheid, to a critique on socio-economic injustices, greed and consumerism, globalism and global neoliberal capitalism.

It is along this line and broader scope of understanding and defining the empire that Meylahn (2011:1) concluded as follows, “The concept of empire has re-emerged as one useful to interpret and describe the joining of dominant global themes that together construct a global homogeneous totality.” As a working definition for the purpose of this article, empire is defined as dominant and enslaving regimes and forces that invade, disrupt, conquer and capture human and ecological spaces by using ideologies, religion, wealth, patronage and dehumanising systems to disempower and dehumanise those under their deceptive powers. Botha (2011:134) asserts, “Empires have adopted symbols of power, success and control, as they signify rules of overpowering, jurisdiction, hegemony and supremacy.”

#### **4.2 Empire and Accra declaration**

The Accra declaration is a reformed confession of faith given birth during the 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in Ghana in 2004 (Van der Borgh, 2012:137; Pillay, 2018:1). According to Dibeela (2014:228), “[t]he Accra Confession is a powerful theological and prophetic document that names empire as a system of disempowering power.” The wording of the Accra Confession (2005: point 11) states the following, “In using the term ‘empire’ we mean the

coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests.” In essence, the power of being and the freedom to live life in full according to the full measure as God purposed it for Africans was taken away from them by dominant global forces. Africans were denied of their justice by European empires, who unfortunately used Western Missionaries to advance their cause. This is because, “We live in a scandalous world that denies God’s call to life for all” (Paragraph 7 of the Accra Confession). Therefore, the Accra Confession was a response and resistance to empire as articulated in the Confession itself (Pillay, 2018:3). In discerning the signs of the times, delegates believed that the hour had come for Christianity in Africa to unmask, confront and challenge the empire in the face of global economic injustice and ecological destruction (Boesak, 2009:1). The Church cannot be therefore a bystander when injustice occurs; hence the need to outline a missiological agenda for the African Church moving to the future.

#### 4.3 Empire, its operations and manifestations

The empire can be best identified, among others, by: *Use of power and authority to benefit empire and not the people it seeks to serve*: According to Du Bois (1938:100), “Europe’s interest in Africa has been the conversion of the heathen, the annexation of colonies and investment for profit in African labour and raw materials.” This is sometimes accompanied by excessive force, as witnessed in the context of slavery in Ghana and apartheid in South Africa.

*It is domineering, enslaving and divisive in its approach*: Empire thrives on creating groups of people or class who control others to its benefit. It uses a hermeneutic of dominance, one that is an enslaving hermeneutic (Boesak, 2017:207) and always accompanied by a hermeneutic of suspicion in order to divide and conquer. The apartheid machinery as an example of a system created by the empire in South Africa, Shaw-Taylor (2011:195) opines that it is a system that was used by few (Whites) to have socio-economic dominance over the majority – who were relegated to homelands and other reserved areas for Black occupation. Blacks were also not meant to trust each other. There is a common saying among Black South Africans, “*Mushonga wa murema ndi mutshena/ likhubwa*” (in Tshivenda) or “*Setlhare sa Mosotho ke Lekgowa*” (in Sesotho) which can be loosely translated as, “A Black person’s medicine is a White person.” When applied to the work context, it implies that Black people only do better in their workspaces when a White person supervises them; and they tend to relax or not do much when a fellow Black person supervises them. This statement unmask the kind of damage that oppressive systems like colonialism and apartheid have done to Blacks, and three issues come to the fore, namely white-

ness perpetuates an inferiority complex among Blacks, it enslaves, and creates a dependency syndrome.

*It manifests itself through dominant forces in society and Churches:* Empire has the ability to manipulate people to advance its cause. Tribalism has been used in Africa to divide Africans along ethnic lines (Court, 2016:53-54). In the case of Rwandan Genocide of 1994, for instance, it was caused because, historically, the colonial powers considered the Tutsis to be a superior race – having superior intelligence and were therefore preferred to be rulers over the Hutus who were agriculturalists (Evans, 1994:344).

*It manifests itself through dominant systems (hegemony):* The Empire has always had ability to use legislations and policy frameworks within a political system to perpetuate structural and systemic dominance of Africans by the West. Speaking in the context of South Africa and adding racism to the equation, Vellem (2015:3) had this to say:

The contemporaneity of racism (with capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and empire) constitutes a continuum giving way to globalisation, but more deeply so, a continuum between modernist theories of politics, theology and ethics right into the ponderings of the current world order.

The empire is also known for using civilisation and technology to destroy the very fibre of society and being. Dibeela (2014:228) agrees, “Empire masquerades through deceitful images of progress, civilisation, technology and even concepts such as democracy.”

*The empire is anti-life and uses the culture of greed to perpetuate the myth around the so-called poor Africa.* It is in this instance accompanied by the prosperity Gospel, which seeks to suck blood out of Africans in the margins – those who are poor and vulnerable. According to Mashau and Kgatle (2019:1), “The prophets of this movement put emphasis on individual success but are silent about or have not developed a systematic theological analysis of economic injustice and social marginalisation that accompanies prosperity Gospel.”

In summary, empire uses power, manipulates, captures, oppresses, divides and destroys. The author, therefore, agrees with Dibeela (2014:228) when he concluded:

Empire is a debilitating system that robs us of what it means to be human. A diabolical system impedes us in our pursuit of a liberating humanism. However, naming it is a significant step towards providing a counter-culture. The naming theology affords us the opportunity to know what kind of beast we are dealing with and to assess what its impact is on life.

## **5. A missiological deconstruction of Christianity in Africa in the face of the empire**

Christianity in Africa has generally reflected the following features:

### **5.1 Denominationalism**

This speaks to a divided faith with a divided mission in Africa. Oduyoye (1996:497) identifies five faces of Christianity in Africa, represented broadly by five types of Churches, namely Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox, Churches of Western descent (Euro-American missionary enterprise), the Roman Catholic, African Initiated Churches and then a new wave producing another type whose nature is yet to be fully studied – the fire syndrome Churches. The author will add Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches to her list. Consequently, African Churches are sites of struggle and different forms of wars – battle of traditions, worship wars, and some have even become social clubs where non-members are not welcome until they crack the membership code such as membership fee and dress code.

### **5.2 Lack of contextualization**

Christianity that failed to have a legit conversation with African culture and religiosity (Simango, 2018:3). Christianity in Africa is a faith covered by a Western coat – African cultural practices were deemed superstitious and even demonised. Therefore, this produced Christians who were easily ‘Christians caught in two-worlds’ and ‘highly compartmentalised’ to breed Sunday or nominal Christians who only worship on a Sunday during the worship hour. These are Christians who have adopted a syncretistic approach to their faith and its praxis (Simango, 2018:7). A story of the wife of an Ethiopian Church leader by Daneel (1970:35) captures this, “When I am sick, I go everywhere; to the nganga when I’m bewitched through a foot-trap, to the prophet if I wish to find out who poisoned me, and to the mission hospital for normal symptoms of illness.”

### **5.3 Christianity that suffers from dependency syndrome**

African Churches are notoriously known to be beggars. They have embraced a culture of begging and they rely heavily on funding from the West (Simango, 2018:5-6). This culture comes as a result of paternalism as adopted by Western Churches. Kim (2019:303) asserts, “Paternalism produces a culture of dependency in the indigenous Church. And unfortunately, this culture is still prevalent among Churches of African descent (Kim, 2019:312).”

### **5.4 Christianity that is captured by the spirit of consumerism**

According to Gifford (1990:373), Christianity in Africa is highly influenced by culture of prosperity, which he defines as a new and foreign element to African Chris-

tianity. American wealth and prosperity Gospel, Christianity has become a game of quickies – ranging from ‘name it’ and ‘claim it’, and the reverberating chorus of ‘I receive’ – all in the name of miracle money and instant riches. Prosperity Gospel is destroying not only Christianity in Africa, but also the very life of ordinary Africans in the margins society. Concerning the damage prosperity Gospel is making in Africa, Mashau and Kgatle (2019:1) concluded that:

Prosperity Gospel has found a fertile ground in Africa, it continues to milk and disadvantage the very people it seeks to serve. It feeds into the culture of greed in Church and society, thereby tapping into the capitalist economic global system.

### 5.5 Christianity is covered by spiritual blindness and inability to self-critique and self-correct

Abuse of religion and gullibility of the public is an example: We have ‘doom prophets’ or ‘Church mafias’ – A lot of crazy stuff is happening on this front – so-called men of God walking on top of their followers, others feeding them grass, petrol and even spraying doom. These are pastors who have somehow succeeded to bring cultic practices in the Church. They get to be worshipped and mostly prey on unsuspecting women sexually. The worship of the so-called ‘man of God’ is the sign of the empire at work in African Church. Mashau and Kgatle (2019:1) concluded, “The popular and materialistic Gospel is sweeping across the continent like a gale force wind, which is irresistible.” What is sad is that there no hermeneutic of discernment is applied to this phenomenon – Christians in Africa refuse to touch the anointed ones of God.

*Christianity that is not pro-life* – a black-lived life in Africa has always been one of ‘cry for life’ as Vuyani Vellem opines. It is a struggle for survival in the margins – against the global order that has embraced racism, capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and empire as part of the current world order (Vellem, 2015:3). The unfortunate thing is that the Church has not been innocent when Africans are subjected to these oppressive systems. Historically, the Church is guilty of being part of the empire’s agenda to subjugate Africans. In his analysis of Biko and the children of Soweto in the 1970s, Boesak (2017:207) noted that:

He [Biko] was critical of a Black Church not being able to break the chains of a colonising, dehumanising White Christianity, continuing to believe in and practicing a theology that kept the Bible captive to an enslaving hermeneutic and ourselves subservient to a Christianised, colonialised mindset. We were the one whose interpretation of the Bible became what he called a “poisoned well” from which our people were forced to drink.

The Church in Africa remains silent when atrocities such as racism, Gender-Based Violence, marginalisation of women and children, and all other forms of injustices against humanity occur. Just as Christian mission and empire became travelling companions during the era of imperialism (Bosch, 1991:302-313) and the era of apartheid, the Church remains an accomplice to injustices faced in this age – “with a Church that seems to have lapsed into a mode of state theology in South Africa” (Vellem, 2013:9).

### **5.6 Christianity that continues to marginalise, dominate and relegate women to the kitchen and childbearing**

It is patriarchal and neglects the very children that it has given birth to. In dealing with the issue of patriarchy as empire, Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2011:7) opines, “Societal patriarchy has ramifications for ecclesiastical patriarchy.” This manifests itself in African Church structures that are not only male dominated but also filled with men who still believe that only men have the monopoly to the Bible and the pulpit.

## **6. Pushing the naked envelop further**

### **6.1 The use of liberative optics to unmask the empire**

In re-imagining the future of Christianity in Africa, from a missiological perspective, Botha (2011:133) concluded that it lives at the edge of the empire, but questions whether Christianity can prevail and be effective under such condition. The foregoing discussion around the relationship between the empire and Christianity in Africa points to an ongoing struggle and therefore the Church in Africa must rise to the occasion if it is to survive the onslaught and serve as a transforming agent in the African soil. The intent of this section is to draw some missiological lessons from the foregoing discussion and suggest solutions to challenges facing Christianity in Africa in the face of the empire. The author opted to use, in this instance, the metaphor of ‘pushing the naked envelop further’ to demonstrate that the empire is already naked and many scholars have already exposed its nakedness; hence the need to contribute towards the discourse by pushing the naked envelop further.

The author borrows this metaphor from a statement by Jessica Levitt (2019), “Just when you think Zodwa Wabantu can’t possibly push the naked envelope further, she rocks up at the Durban July wearing an outfit that shows off just about everything. And the tiny bits that weren’t on display were barely covered.” The narrative of naked truth as stated here fits well with the liberation praxis engagement. No matter how revealing and jaw-dropping her body and dress code is, the author finds Zodwa Libram liberating to the manner of how African men should view and relate to a body of a woman – not as a sex-object but a liberated image of God that celebrates her femininity.

In pushing the naked envelop of the empire further, the naked truth narrative ties in closely with the liberation praxis engagement of Jesus Christ in John 8:31-32— 'knowing and being liberated by the truth.' This narrative gives us optic lenses, the 'hermeneutic of naked truth' through which the African Church and theology can be liberated to see the empire for 'who' or 'what' it is. However, knowing how the empire operates in terms of using diverse hermeneutics like dominance and suspicion, African Churches would require an array of hermeneutics that can assist in the process of unmasking the diverse, disguised, confusing and deceitful operations of the empire. Africa requires liberative hermeneutics such as madness (see Mark 11:15-18), ubuntuology – for its life-giving, life-affirming and life transforming abilities (see John 10:10), power – with particular reference to pneumatological power (see Luke 24:49), vulnerability in mission (see Philippians 2:5-11) and discernment (see 1 John 4:1) among others. In embracing this array of optics, it will allow the African Church a window towards liberation, but also an opportunity to self-critique and self-correct in the light of the Biblical imperatives on how to be Church in the context of the empire.

## 7. A missiological agenda for Christianity in Africa

The task of drawing missiological lessons from the foregoing discussion is the task to map out a missiological agenda going forward, namely:

### 7.1 The marriage between empire and Christianity in Africa must fall

One of the urgent tasks of the African Church today is to break away from its knot with the empire. What has caused uneasiness and pain throughout the mission history of Christianity and empire has been 'the correlation between political and faith spheres' (Botha, 2011:135). Where the empire dominates Church or where Church dominates the empire, the Church loses its prophetic voice as we have witnessed during the apartheid era and in the democratic dispensation (Kgatale, 2018:1). In response to apartheid, Bosch (1980:223) proposed a vision of a Church as an alternative community that is sent to serve the world in solidarity with all mankind. According to Bosch (1980:223), "The mutual solidarity within this community is not prescribed by loyalties and prejudices of kinship, race, people, language, culture, class, political, convictions, religious affinities, common interests, or professions. It transcends all these differences." This is the Church that understands that it is both *in* and *not of this world*. This understanding will go a long way to help the Church to maintain its autonomous status away from the empire. Meylahn (2011:10) asserts, "The Church is called to be an alternative community with a specific way of doing theology in and with the local community, but that is not of empire."

## 7.2 Christianity must be liberated from Western Christianity

As already noted in this article, Christianity has always been labelled as a religion of the West, and it has been introduced as such because of its historical knot with imperial regimes. The first task in this instance is to liberate the Bible from the misconception that it is a Western book and therefore not relevant in Africa. The Bible is a Christian book that remains relevant to every given context. The African Church must refuse the myth that seeks to relegate it to Western Christianity. As for its relevancy and its worth in the African context, Boesak (2017:8-9) remarked:

But these words from the Scriptures are not the siren songs of desperate optimism: they are rooted in the promises of God and the Lordship of Christ over every single inch of life, including our struggles for dignity and justice. They are anchored in the sacrificial commitment of the people to the struggle for justice. They are fashioned by the imagination of the people toward freedom over against the turgid rigidity that is the mindset of oppression and false consciousness. They hold out the inextinguishable hope for a people in struggle whose faith is fundamental to that struggle.

The second task would be to liberate Christianity itself from the spell of Western identity. Christianity is a faith that has found its roots in Africa even before Europe.

## 7.3 Christianity in Africa must fast-track the decoloniality and Africanisation agenda

The task of the African Church is to arrest the damage caused by the marriage between the empire Western Christianity. Issues of ‘naming’, ‘cleansing’, ‘healing’, ‘salvation’, and ‘reconciliation’ must find resonance in the African culture, African epistemologies and faith practices. The African Church must decolonise and Africanise the Christian message for Christianity to be at home in Africa. The task of contextualising Christianity in Africa remains a pressing task to an African Church. However, the hermeneutic and theology of discernment is needed in this instance to ensure that we do not fall into a trap of ‘throwing a child with a bath’ or ‘avoiding to be critical and be syncretistic’ in the process of Africanising.

## 7.4 Christianity in Africa must propel the task of standing where God stands when coming to injustices in the world

This urgent task is captured under article 4 of the Belhar Confession – a reformed confession ‘born in the southern African struggle against apartheid’ (Van Huffel, 2013:1). According to Mashau (2018:138-140), the use of the metaphor ‘standing where God stands’ includes, among others, standing for God, standing for the truth, standing beyond known borders, standing in solidarity with those in the margins, and standing for justice. The African Church should advocate for the Christian faith, which is liberating, life-giving

and life-affirming. For example, “African Christianity must develop an alternative spirituality of liberation which taps into African philosophy of life called ‘ubuntu’” (Mashau & Kgatle, 2019:1). This will serve as an antidote to prosperity Gospel and the culture of greed that had rendered many Africans gullible. Where the empire has become like the Churches that supported apartheid, or the current frenzy worship of the so-called ‘man of God’ in what has become ‘abuse of religion and gullibility-gate’ in the South African context, the African Church should apply the hermeneutic of discernment, self-critique and self-correct as a way of dealing with the empire in our midst.

### 7.5 Christianity in Africa must liberate Western Christianity

It will take Christianity in Africa to liberate Christianity in the West by extending an olive branch in areas of forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. It will also take the African Church to take a lead in redefining the transforming agenda of the Church in the age of global economic, ecological destruction and attacks to human life by pandemics such as COVID-19 and Gender-Based Violence. The liberating hermeneutic of ubuntu can assist Western Christianity to overcome individualism and nominality in their praxis. In this instance, the task of the Church in Africa is to share the theology of ubuntu with the global Church. Speaking in the context of liberating humanism in the African context, Dibeela (2014:230) is of the view that ubuntu should remain the driver because, “The struggle against empire cannot be waged through mimicking the very life-denying systems that we seek to undo.” Mashau and Kgatle (2019:5) agree that ubuntu can go a long way to liberate and empower Africans and the world in the current context of stifling globalisation.

### 7.6 Christianity in Africa must liberate masculinity and dominance of women by men

In the age where women and children are marginalised, abused, violated and murdered by male species, we should proclaim a liberating praxis of Christianity that affirms all of humanity as created in the image of God. Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2011:9) agrees:

There is need for the formulation of a more appropriate theological anthropology. New holistic images of all people regardless of race, class or gender. The humanity of all people created in the image of God must be accentuated in the discourse. Men and woman stand as equal partners next to each other in their relationship to God and are jointly bearers of the image of God (*imago Dei*).

## 8. Conclusion

This article revisited the discourse around empire and Christianity in Africa. It became clear that many have written about this topic from different angles and con-

cluded that the relationship between the empire and Christianity in Africa has been in existence and would continue to exist for years to come. This can be traced back from early Christianity, Roman Empire, colonial and imperial era, apartheid era and beyond. This article concluded that while the empire uses the hermeneutics of dominance to capture, dominate, enslave, manipulate and destroy to advance its cause, Christianity in Africa could be liberated by choosing to identify the empire, its tracks and operations in Africa. The Church in Africa has a missiological task not only to liberate African people, but the rest of the world, and in particular Western Christianity with all the myth around the Bible and Christianity as Western products. With the correct optics and contextually relevant theology of ubuntu as life-giving, life-affirming and life-transforming, this liberation of humanity and Christianity can be achieved.

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