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Revisiting John Calvin's Christology: A sub-Saharan African postcolonial perspective

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Postcolonial Africa critically re-examines Christological discourses to determine the humanity of black people and its soteriological and Christological import. This article revisits John Calvin's Christology from an African postcolonial perspective in sub-Saharan Africa. This framework contends that imperialism continues in various forms despite the physical end of colonial administration in sub-Saharan Africa. This perspective offers a pluralistic and existentialistic interpretation of Calvin's Christology to unravel imperial Christology. It dissociates itself from the imperial claim that presents Calvin's Christology as linear and singular to sustain imperial interests. This article critically reflects on Christ as Mediator, the offices of Christ, and *Imago Dei* as the datum for sub-Saharan African postcolonial emancipatory narrative.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article explores the Christology of John Calvin from a postcolonial perspective. It works with different theological voices necessary for the deconstruction and decolonisation of imperial Christology. Particularly, it collaborates with black and liberation theologies, systematic, philosophical, political, and contemporary theologies, and ethical reflections rooted in the radix of African theology and context.

Keywords: John Calvin; Calvin's three offices of Christ; *Imago Dei*; imperial Christology; postcolonial; decolonisation; Political Theology or Liberation Theology; Mukuyu Tree.

Introduction

The tragedy of Africans is not only deeply rooted in colonial legacies, but also in the Christian narratives. Many different theories have emerged that allude to this claim. Postcolonial political theologians such as Katongole E, Antwi E.K.E, Boesak A.A, and Mdingi H, among others, offer some critical insights into the interpenetration between imperialism and missionary Christological interpretation. However, this article is based on my doctoral research on John Calvin's Christology.[1] I am cognisant of the different theories and metaphysics that influence the interpretation of Calvin's Christology. Inevitably, critical introspection of context and interpretation of the contemporary theological trajectories determine the interpretative lens of Calvin's Christology. In this regard, postcolonial theory and sub-Saharan Africa become the contextual lens or datum to revisit and examine the Christological import of Calvin's Christology for the oppressed black people, relegated as subhuman.[2] Using this interpretative tool, the research deconstructs and decolonises the Eurocentric interpretation to discover the plurality of Calvin's Christology. In this regard, the postcolonial conceptual framework unravels imperial Christology and classifies it as a deliberate and inherently appropriative interpretation of Christology designed to sustain colonial interests and enhance imperial signification. Here, we discover that imperial Christology not only positions European humanity as normative humanity, but also fails to separate Christianity from conversion and colonialism.

To better understand John Calvin's Christology requires critical attention to his theological progression. Scripture is one of the vantage points of Calvin's theological progression. He call it spectacles through which we come to the specific knowledge of God, precisely revealing Christ as Mediator (Calvin 1960:I.6.1–3). However, this article revisits critical themes of his Christology, such as Christ as Mediator, the three offices of Jesus Christ, and *Imago Dei*, while weaving his atonement theories in line with the contemporary postcolonial discourses. This task necessitates dialogue with our own context to determine our humanity and discern the soteriological and Christological import.

1.PhD research title: Who is Jesus Christ for us? An African postcolonial analysis and interpretation of John Calvin's Christology.

2.See Vosloo (2015) for further reading.

Christology of John Calvin

Calvin's vantage point in his Christology is rooted in his incarnation theology.[3] Christ's incarnation is central as it depicts the majesty of God that descended upon humanity. Calvin's viewpoint is reminiscent of contemporary discourses on Spirit- and Logos- Christology, as it emphasises the divinity and humanity of Jesus. In this way, Calvin affirms that Jesus is true God and true man insofar as he is our redeemer. This view denounces the celestial humanity of Christ by affirming the embodiment and reality of Jesus Christ. Jesus is not a phantom Jesus but a real Jesus who assumed our flesh. This renders all theologies that disregard and relegate the body as insignificant as heretical (Calvin 1960:II.12.1–2).

Peter Wyatt (1996:9) and De Greef (1993:181) comment that Calvin understood incarnation as a new way in which God called humanity to return to God. Calvin is known to have advanced the theology of the mutuality of the two natures of Christ by arguing that Christ can be God for us because he does not cease to be God over us in the incarnation. In the same way, the humanity of Christ never ceases to be our humanity in the movement of God towards us. Christ remained eternally God, never confined to an earthly body, but continuously filled the world as he had done from the beginning (Calvin 1960:II.13.4). In this way, the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ mutually gives to each other what belongs to the other. The communication of properties discloses that the two natures are mutually exclusive but inseparable; and neither nature can be grasped in isolation from the other (Calvin 1960:II.14.1–2; Edmondson 2004:34–35).

Karl Barth (1960:46–49) supports this theological exposition by reflecting on the covenantal relationship of God and humanity. In Christ, there is no isolation of humanity from God or God from humanity. Barth's covenantal ontology discloses the mutual contraction of the covenant, which is preserved and fulfilled in the humanity of Christ. Tellingly, God freely relates to humanity in Jesus Christ as the judge judged on our behalf. Thus, Christ's incarnation is not just God's self-disclosure, but also discloses humanity's election and the climax of the union with Christ, the true image of God (Engel 1988:2).

Both Calvin and Barth present this dialectical relationship between the natures of Christ to be a necessary Christological import. It paradoxically reinforces African humanity and relationality to God through the incarnation of Christ. Wyatt (1996:46) reflects on Calvin's Christological conclusion that the incarnation illuminates God's grace to indiscriminately adopt all people unto hope of salvation. This radical conclusion exposes the imperial Christology and its appropriation that subjected African peoples to the claim that they are predestined to suffering and slavery. Meanwhile, Calvin understood the two powers of Christ – as the creative Word and the Mediator to explicitly expose both the ontological and epistemological presupposition of the Logos. Calvin does not affirm racial exclusion about election (Wyatt 1996:49).

African humanity conceptualises this dialectical relationship between the two natures of Christ as a critical interlocutor for determining our humanity. In Jesus' body, which was gendered, sexed, regulated, and violated by imperialists, we see our bodies that were marked for extermination through colonialism and the slave trade, and continue to suffer the same ontological holocaust (Copeland 2018:63–65). Interpreting Calvin's Christology in a postcolonial context requires an epistemological preference that resonates with the preferential option for the poor. This is God's direct interest in siding with the poor and bringing liberation against a political order that subjects them through social and economic exclusion (Ruether 1981:20).

Calvin's conceptualisation of the incarnation posits the significance of the scandal of particularity amidst the universal claims. God enters human history and identifies with us in our painful experiences. God became human at one point in history, revealing God's self among a particular people. Assuming human nature is the final and definitive revelation of God among us. The scandal of particularity shows us how God descends into the weakness of the baby, suffers rejection, and is crucified. Yet in all these life passages, Jesus was the very revelation of God (Drake & Barrett 2022).

Calvin's Christology does not have a broader anthropological base. His 16th-century anthropology is limited to European humanity deeply embedded in patriarchal hegemony. Thus, the anthropology of oppressed black people is historically excluded from the theological discourse of his time. However, Calvin demonstrates an inclusive and expansive theology within his context. He defies patriarchal dominance to refute male preferential positions and assert the humanity of white females, as he reflected on the Jewish political order (Calvin 1960:II.13.3). Thus, the oppressed step into Calvin's theology of inclusion to assert that Christ's incarnation is radically opposing subjugation, marginalisation or oppression.

To have an in-depth understanding of the claim laid here, we turn to the themes highlighted earlier. Through these themes, I demonstrate the plurality of Calvin's Christology to refute the linear and singular claims that have been used to stereotype, subjugate, commodify, and jeopardise the salvation of the oppressed. It posits hope for the oppressed not based on appropriation or retaliation, but as a plural hope for all struggling, suffering, and oppressed peoples (Rigby 2018:260).

Christ as mediator

Calvin's theology of the Mediator stems from his incarnation theology. While reflecting on the role of the Mediator, Calvin also makes a radical connection to the offices of Jesus Christ.

3. However, Calvin's Christology is intertwined with other doctrines such as Soteriology, Creation, Pneumatology or Eschatology. So, a closer look at these doctrines offers a broader view of his Christology.

Calvin recognises that the Mediator should be both true God and true man, because no esoteric or inanimate Christ saves. Instead, Christ, as true God and true human, has the power to save (Calvin 1960:II.12.1–2). Wyatt (1996:1–3) offers insights into Calvin's claims, asserting that the true Christ is neither disfigured nor emptied of his power in the incarnation. Rather, it demonstrates that the Mediator assumes human nature, and, conversely, human salvation assumes the incarnation of Jesus. In this regard, the Mediator, Jesus Christ, is distinctively known as the Son of God, and uniquely, the Son of man in communion with humanity (ed. Kerr 1989:72).

If Christ had not assumed our nature and remained the 'Holy Other', humanity would have been hopeless. Calvin (1960:II.12.1) contests that it was not in humanity's power to ascend to God, but the very majesty of God assumed our humanity. Humanity is vulnerable without the Mediator, as corruption and sin make it impossible to come near God. Calvin's view of the Mediator does not endanger Christ's divinity at incarnation. Instead, it posits Christ's ontological and cosmic mediation as God's eternal word. Christ remained eternally God despite voluntarily assuming the flesh and suffering death on the cross (Calvin 1960:II.13.4).

Kerr (ed. 1989:72) asserts that Calvin understood the task of the Mediator as restoration of humanity to God. Human restoration is transformation, as it offers new identities not based on racial pigmentation, but based on the ontological necessity of our being. We are transformed from being children of humanity to children of God; heirs of Gehenna, to heirs of God's kingdom (Calvin 1960:II.12.2).

Calvin's concept of human incapability to save themselves constituted his theological conclusions of the Mediator. Christ's mediation is between the transcendent God and fallen humanity. McGrath (2011:286) conceptualises Calvin's theology of mediation to locate mediation of revelation and mediation of salvation. Mediation of revelation relates to *Logos* Christology, as it mediates the gap between the transcendent God and creation. *Logos* Christology exemplifies Christ as the fixed point of mediation between God and humanity. This discloses Christ as Mediator, but he cannot be propositionally or intellectually conceived by humanity. It is a divine act of God. Christ's mediation is substantiated as a revealed historical truth that occurred in its specific time and space, epistemologically. Ontologically, this truth, as personal truth, relates to God's self-disclosure, which changes the course of history in the person of Jesus Christ (McGrath 2011:287).

McGrath offers a critical reflection on the mediation of salvation to determine the soteriological import of the incarnation for humanity. He agrees with Calvin that on account of the fall, humanity's natural gifts and faculties became impaired, and the will and the reason also became contaminated by sin. However, the difference between Calvin and McGrath lies in their conceptualisation of human epistemology. McGrath (2011) elaborates that:

> Unbelief is thus seen as an act of will as much as an act of reason; it is not simply a failure to discern the hand of God within the created order, but a deliberate decision not to discern it and not to obey God. (p. 287)

But Calvin's theology of the Mediator shows, in our contemporary discourses, that humanity has epistemological and soteriological shortcomings. Humanity is short of the rational and volitional resources to discern God within the created order fully. Instead, it contends that salvation presupposes obedience to God. In this regard, both Calvin and McGrath show that the knowledge of God and salvation are derived not from the human situation (McGrath 2011:287).

Recognising the human epistemological and soteriological shortcomings legitimises the claim that the downward movement of the divine is a radical refutation of imperialism. God enters human history as a mediator to deal with the existential challenges that humanity grapples with. This is radical liberation of the oppressed that defies othering and dethrones imperial Christology that relegates black people to subhumanity or hopelessness. Thus, any denial jeopardises and obscures the salvation of the oppressed. Instead, it legitimises systems and structures of oppression and refutes Christ as the epiphany of God (Calvin 1960:II.12.2–4).

Three offices of Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ as priest

Calvin's theology of the office of the priest is related to restoration and mediation. This, in part, shapes Calvin's atonement theories as he reflects on the death of Jesus Christ (Calvin 1960:II.15.6). Thus, Christ, as priest and Mediator, is the expiation of humanity's sin, obtaining God's favour and appeasing God's wrath. Through this sacrificial death, we understand the eternal law of compassion, which makes humanity companions in Christ. Christ's death reveals both the objective and subjective dimensions. The objective dimension reveals the renewal of the relationship between God and humanity. The subjective dimension reveals that Christ suffered on behalf of and in place of humanity. Although the subjective dimension has been misrepresented to justify human suffering, this was not Calvin's intention. What Calvin offers is not only to bridge the ontological gap between God and humanity caused by sin, but also to address the human soteriological and epistemological shortcomings (Edmondson 2004:91–92).

To explain it better, Calvin (1960:II.16.1) contends that the name of Jesus is the savour of every discourse. Although Calvin's theology of Jesus as priest is equivocal, it cannot critically challenge social repression. Nevertheless, critical interpretation of the objective and subjective dimensions creates dynamic human-to-human relations that engage the discourse of justice and liberation. Humanity is awakened to God's love, the other, and the world (Calvin 1960:II.17.2; Edmondson 2004:93, 110). Calvin's theoretical framework of the objective and subjective dimensions radically unravels

humanity's sinfulness, focusing on and learning from the *kenosis* of Christ to redefine our humanity.

Calvin (1960:II.26.2) does not lose sight of Christ's death as he crystallised his conceptual framework of the priestly office. He regards humanity's condition to be miserable and ruinous apart from Christ. Humanity misses the soteriological import and underestimates the benefit of liberation. However, Christ's violent death speaks to the finality of human bloodshed for the oppressed. African political metaphysics before independence involved sacrifices. Blood was shed to attain political independence and freedom from colonialism. However, the struggle against systemic colonialism (neo-colonialism) is not yet over.

Jesus Christ as king

Calvin's conceptual framework of Christ as king is deeply interwoven with the other offices and the theology of the Mediator. However, his epistemology recognises the kingship of Christ to be spiritual. Calvin (1960:II.15.3) observes that Christ as king is the source of strength and protection for the church amidst life exigencies and reveals God's reign. Although humanity is given hope, it must await the full fruit of this grace in the age to come. Calvin's metaphysics and epistemology might not be closer to African metaphysics and epistemology. But he helps us to develop a political theology that accounts for the reign of God in the political discourse. This equips the church not to be reticent and apolitical. Instead, it rejects a utopia by offering effective, practical responses to the soteriological and political import of Christ as king.

However, Calvin does not overstate Christ's reign on earth in either its physical or present aspects. But how does this impact the eschatological and teleological import of the reign of Jesus in line with postcolonial experiences of oppression? It jeopardises the holistic soteriological import of the present and the future for the oppressed. Calvin's epistemological shortcoming is influenced by his preoccupation with the spiritual import of salvation. His limitation of the salvific import of the kingly office reduces salvation to one convenient interpretation, and thus renders it to be spiritual blessedness only. For Calvin (1960:II.15.4), the promise of Christ is not about outward and earthly privileges of life but heavenly life.

While Calvin is criticised for his limitations, he helps us avoid a linear approach to the emancipatory project. Furthermore, he helps us engage in critical dialogue with him as we reflect on God's reign. We cannot lose sight of the incarnation of Christ in Calvin's theology. We engage with his incarnational theology to discern the contextual relevance of the office of Christ as king. Here, we recognise that Christ's reign is juxtaposed with the earthly government. Christ is the just king who shows us the justice of God that denounces the oppressor appropriating and excluding the marginalised peoples. Oppressors have ostracised the poor from the economic and social fibre of the haves. However, our epistemology does not reduce salvation to economics, producing a commercialised and privatised Christ, but rather to the passible king who saves to protect the eternal salvation of souls. It is about the king who fortifies with courage to stand against evil, struggle fearlessly against the devil, sin, and death (Calvin 1960:II.15.4).

This harmonisation of postcolonial thought with Calvin's historical, social, or political context confronts the hidden layers of imperial Christology in present-day discourses. Calvin (1960:II.15.5) distinguishes Christ's reign from the presence of evil in the world to unravel the hidden layers of imperial Christology. The epitome of this difference is the *kenosis* of Christ. Christ emptied himself to share with the world his kingdom, which lies in the Spirit. Although we noted earlier that Calvin's epistemological shortcoming is incompatible with postcolonial experiences, his exposition of Christ as king reinvigorates hope for emancipation (ed. Kerr 1989:76). Christ assumed our flesh not only to reveal God's aseity and kingdom, but also a covenantal relationality and Christ's lordship insofar as he is our brother, who shared our lives and assumed our flesh (Edmondson 2004:117, 127).

Jesus Christ as prophet

The sub-Saharan religious context is not devoid of knowledge of prophets. Thus, reading about Jesus as a prophet becomes interesting to African peoples. Calvin (1960:II.15.1–2) uses this office not only to unpack the soteriological import, but also to distinguish Jesus as the final prophet. It is the culmination of all revelation – God's will and self-disclosure. Jesus, as the prophet, interprets the law, the doctrine of life, and the covenant of grace for humanity. This trajectory is grounded in his exegetical framework, which interprets Old Testament prophecy as pointing to Jesus' prophetic duty. Calvin's Christological claim is rooted in the social, political, or religious duties of the prophet in society. Thus, Christ's prophetic role is connected to the emancipation and justice of the oppressed. Liberation, healing, restoration, and freedom are conceptually part of the soteriological import of the prophetic office (Calvin 1960:II.15.2).

Calvin (1960:II.15.2) understands Christ's anointing pedagogically to bring God's grace as he is the herald and witness of the same in the power of the Spirit. However, his prophetic role comes with the cost of the humiliating and yet redeeming cross (Edmondson 2004:154–156). Why is Jesus Christ the finality of prophecy? Calvin (1960:II.15.2) unapologetically argues that the gospel of Christ is complete. Anything other than Christ's gospel is extraneous. Christ's gospel is the embodiment of wisdom, knowledge, and the whole immensity of heavenly benefits. This is the orbit that Calvin provides for contemporary prophetic roles in the religious, political, social, cultural, or economic contexts.

However, none of the offices can adequately address the Christological question. Rather, they are mutually exclusive, yet inseparable. Thus, it is improper to consign 'full revelation' and the fullness of the soteriological import to one office. Instead, they complement each other. In fact, no single

Christological title can sufficiently answer the Christological question. Nevertheless, in these offices, Calvin lays a hermeneutical foundation for postcolonial Africa to respond to the Christological question while embracing its Africanness.

Imago Dei: Calvin's anthropology

The incarnation of Jesus is an interlocutor for Calvin's theology of the *Imago Dei*. The incarnation is the divine absolute that bridged the gulf between God and humanity. To put it in perspective, Calvin's anthropology is grounded in the ontological necessity of the *Imago Dei*, which determines the relationality dimension. Thus, incarnation restores our humanity as Christ assumes our flesh. Christ restored the corrupted and defeated nature by reforming us into God's image (Calvin 1960:I.15.4; II.12.1–2).

This influenced Calvin's theological and ideological development of the *Imago Dei*. Calvin (1960:I.15.1) argues that the *Imago Dei* is the knowledge of God reciprocated by the corresponding knowledge of ourselves. Most importantly, it is a distinctive feature of Calvin's anthropology, as he differentiates the general from the specific reflection of the image of God. Humanity is the specific reflection, as there is no part, not even the body itself, in which some sparks of God's glory did not glow. However, a critical examination of what constitutes the *Imago Dei* in Calvin's Christology reveals an epistemological shortfall. Calvin differentiated the soul from the body to define the primary seat of the *Imago Dei*. Although he contended that all parts glowed, his preferential treatment of the soul as the *Imago Dei's* primary seat and power presents a theological dichotomy of the *Imago Dei* (Calvin 1851:20, 26–27, 1960:I.15.3).

Postcolonial interpretation provides a synthesis of the soul and the body as it defines the *Imago Dei*. This provides a conceptual framework that understands the soul as one way of viewing the person from inside out, and the body as another way of viewing the person from the outside in (Olthuis 2022:100–101). At the core of this conceptualisation of the *Imago Dei* is a stand against creating ontological crises that regard the body and soul as modes of being (modalism).

Although Calvin is criticised for his theological dichotomy of the *Imago Dei*, his ontological and relational dimensions contradict discourses of othering and subjugation. Christ as the ground of the ontological and relational dimensions of the *Imago Dei* determines the ethical response to the soteriological and Christological import of the two natures of Christ. For Calvin, it is not a mere reference to *logos ensarkos* and *logos asarkos,* but a disclosure of God's self-accommodation for the election of humanity. Furthermore, discloses Christ's ontological and preeminent existence through assuming our nature (Calvin 1960:II.13.4; Drake 2020; Wyatt 1996:30–35).

However, postcolonial Africa unravels the Eurocentric interpretation that led to the colonisation, assimilation, or extermination of Africans. Imperial Christology regarded black Africans as predestined for slavery (reprobates) and white people as masters (elects). Colonial legacies show that the interpenetration of the church and state sanctioned the slavery of black people. Antwi (2018:13–14) finds that Pope Nicholas V issued a 'bull *Dum Diversas*' in 1452 to allow the Portuguese to capture and enslave people. But a closer look at Calvin's theology uncovers the indiscriminate election despite writing from a 16th-century Eurocentric perspective (Wyatt 1996:46).

Therefore, revisiting the two powers of Christ provides a deeper insight into Calvin's perspective. *Imago Dei* is neither rooted nor conditioned by racial preference. It is neither black nor white nor static, but it is a dynamic reflection of God. It is unflinchingly the acknowledgement of the humanity of God in the oppressed and lynched black and brown bodies (Cone 2011:3). Such recognition is undergirded by dignity, which is a constant element in Calvin's anthropology. It is aided by a twofold knowledge of the self – knowledge of human excellence and nothingness (Calvin 1960:I.15.1).

Calvin's ontological and relational dimensions of the *Imago Dei* affect the self-knowledge, fostering a harmonious relationship with God, the other, and creation in the postlapsarian era. Humanity is restored by Christ's redemption and brought to its 'true grandeur' and 'full dignity' (Beza 1836:90). Wyatt (1996:78) synthesises that Calvin uses the two dimensions to define the theonomous nature of the intelligentsia and to critically disclose the complementarity between relation and being, intellect and piety. However, Calvin's portrait of humanity is complex, multidimensional, plural, and dynamic. This offers justice to the dynamic reality of the self – a being full of inconsistencies and tensions, but whole (Engel 1988:15–23).

This reconfigures our understanding of bearing the image of God. We decolonise imperial Christology to assert the intrinsic dignity of black humanity. This task denounces white supremacy and axiological preference over black people, and subsequently their subjugation. African postcolonial critique prudently and unequivocally resonates with Calvin (1960:I.15.5) in refuting the rendering of humanity as consubstantial with God insofar as we bear the image of God.

Christology, imperialism and African sub-Saharan context

Calvin provided some critical themes that function as interlocutors for sub-Saharan Christological import and signification. Calvin's Christological signification is reviewed in light of our experiences to resist the determination of our humanity by imperialists. What determines our humanity is a complex and correlated matrix of the intertwined and varied variables differentiated from the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' or Heidegger's Dasein (Greenway 2015:18; Henriksen 2023:110, 155). Through this lens, we redefine the relevance of black power, black consciousness, and black

theology to assert the inseparability of existentialism and Christology. This determines our Christological praxis that refutes social and cultural decadence and exposes the overt interpenetration between Christianity and imperialism (Phiri 2006:190; Stinton 2004:7–13).

Christology and oppression

Our history is never complete without the slave narratives and colonialism. These are functional tools that exacerbated black suffering and kept them on the margins. Imperialists relegated black people to machines and tools for productivity, collateral, and denomination currency (Bailey 2005:157; Cannon 1988:31–32, 162). This imperial signification is derived from the Enlightenment influenced by the doctrines of European domination and the doctrine of discovery. Enlightenment was nothing but a socially and politically constructed weapon for the enslavement and extermination of black people. Thus, the interpenetration between Christianity and imperialism renders white supremacy as an ideological distortion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and a failure to transcend white axiological culture (Cone 1997:42, 88).

Imperialism not only violated our humanity, but also the humanity of Jesus by presenting the incarnation of Jesus as an imperial project. It failed to account for the transformation and Passover from death to life, injustice to justice, subhuman to human for the oppressed peoples (Gutiérrez 1974:175; Johnson 2002:151). Imperial Christology subjugated the black people and denied the particularity of the Christological question to sustain colonialism. The deliberate departure from embodied Christology disembodied Africans from viewing themselves as creative hosts and containers of Christ (Urbaniak 2018:179).

Tellingly, black people suffered atrocities that form an a priori for Christological praxis. These atrocities are part of the colonial legacies that enforced imperial hegemony and totalisation to forbid the emancipation of the oppressed. Imperial Christology represented divine impassibility as it refused to interpret God as 'a Political God', 'Protector of the Poor', and 'Defender of the Oppressed' or 'God of the Oppressed' (Cone 1997:58). African Christology identifies the political[4] to move away from amnestic and esoteric Christology. Our historical anamnesis and identification of the political refute depoliticising the interpenetration between Christianity (as a religion) and imperialism. This interpenetration demonstrates that oppression was not an accident. There was a human responsibility behind it disguised as a friend, yet it is an enemy (Gutiérrez 1974:173; Schmitt 2008:44–46).

Africans suffered prejudice and othering based on the skin, political, and economic interests of the white people. Black people were regarded as non-beings. But Scripture revealed God's otherness, which determined the humanity of the black people. God's otherness was radically different from that of the God of the imperials. In this regard, African Americans conceived God as Negro based on the black people's metaphysics and political experiences. God's otherness defied the lines created by the imperials, which relegated black people to the periphery, away from the centre, and deemed them suitable for it (Cone 1997:2, 5–9, 29; Gutiérrez 1974:106). Urbaniak (2019:784) conceptualises this trajectory as a movement from mere contextualisation to consistent messaging of emancipation, rather than as a battlefield for Africanity.

The cross, slavery and the Mukuyu Tree

Africans recognise the tragedy of the cross to be synonymous with the tragedy of the slave trade and many evils forcefully brought upon them. Slavery denied Africans' embodiment, which was dialectically and diametrically connected to the land. Land is one of the variables that determines our humanity. Disembodiment led to a collapse of meaning, an injustice unfathomable to imperialists (Copeland 2018:5–8; Mbiti 1975:12; Urbaniak 2018:183). Thus, slavery is the most visible and present historical witness of the imperial project of domination. It shows us how imperial Christology failed to regard the other as sacred. The African body was marked as dangerous and denied the otherness of being a sacred host of God. But our hermeneutics of survival revealed God as the one who dwells among those made to eat grass and drink petrol. Imperial Christology never oriented itself to the possibility of recognising the other and the stranger as God (Maluleke 2015:39; Veldsman 2018:215).

Thus, when reflecting on the cross, we see Jesus' body being violated like an African in chattel slavery. Tellingly, the cross is the solidification of power by the imperialists. It suppressed opposition to the imperial interests. Thus, the social and political context of the cross remains critical for the oppressed to determine the Christological import amidst non-being (Cone 2011:157; Trelstad 2006:116). Additionally, the ontological connection to Jesus becomes the vantage point from which black people identify with Jesus's blackness. Jesus suffered as one of us, with us and for us to upend the abstract givenness of black humanity (Cone 1997:125).

African postcolonial Christological contestation unravels the cross's dualistic function in Africa. The functionality of the cross in white communities is intended to preserve racial integrity and white supremacy.

It is a symbol of power that subjugates those who are different. But the cross of Jesus symbolises divine power that defies imperialism to ascertain and determine the humanity of the oppressed. Notably, this differentiation is the antithesis of the imperialist thesis, which seeks to silence voices of dissent. Prudently, Cone, Trelstad, and Gutiérrez recognise that Christ suffered like a black African political dissenter in the hands of imperialists on the cross. Jesus was reckoned politically and religiously guilty by the inscription on his

4.Carl Schmitt (2008:44–45) identifies the political as friend and enemy, and binaries such as spiritual and temporal, ideas and interests and superstructure and substructure, among others, to denounce depoliticising the state and religion.

cross: 'The King of the Jews' (Cone 2011:18; Gutiérrez 1974:214; Trelstad 2006:116).

In black communities, the cross represents death and life, judgement and mercy, suffering and hope, which are against the conceptualisation of the imperial cross. Configuring the tragedy of the cross in imperial Christology, we identify some of the symbols that similarly enhanced imperialism. African Americans experienced lynching in similar ways to crucifixion on the cross (Cone 2011:31). Southern Africa experienced the tragedy of the cross not only through the apartheid regime, but also through slavery. In particular, Zambia's own experience with the Mukuyu Tree provides deep insight into the tragedy that many Zambians suffered. Zambians were auctioned for slavery under the Mukuyu Tree. They were separated from their loved ones and pitched in a different world. This collapsed their world, humanity, and meaning of life (Zambia National Heritage Conservation 2019). The Mukuyu Tree serves to remind us of history, which resists historical amnesia that benefits the imperialists.

However, the Mukuyu Tree, alongside other trees, served as a shelter for political gatherings. The liberation motif was orchestrated and sustained through such gatherings. Eventually, Zambia witnessed the rise of Cha-cha-cha, which marked the end of the people's fear of the British imperial power (Macpherson 1974:354–356). Existentially, the Mukuyu Tree is an epitome of tragedy, vulnerability, and brokenness on the one hand, and of resilience and freedom on the other. The cross, the lynching tree, and the Mukuyu Tree join the emotionally charged symbols that signify resistance to imperial signification and givenness (Cone 2011:3).

Christology and politics

African metaphysics integrates politics and religion to resonate about human life. The inseparability denounces the closure of the political and political Christology (Mbiti 1975:11). Closure is an intra-theological self-critique and self-destruction, an unintended annulment of any belief in God's political relevance or of any socially relevant theology. Thus, integration refutes the totalisation project of imperialism through the church's theological power to interpret the correlation matrix between political and theological power (Schmitt 2008:34, 46, 113). This dispels the white light metaphor that rides on the unjust functionality of the binaries and power dynamics to relegate the oppressed to the de facto and subordinate entities (Alessandri 2023:169; Isasi-Diaz 2004:35).

At the centre of political Christology is the determination of the sovereign. African Political Christology defies Schmitt's (2008:114–115) classification of the sovereign as solely the individual, whose interest reverts to imperialism. Rather, through the unromanticised Ubuntu philosophy, it posits the sovereign as the people within the community whose individuation is undeniable. This power enables the individual and community to refute the pathological dissociation and abstract belonging that is meant to benefit the imperialists (Bediako 1995:10; Wong 2023:82, 89–91).

When Christology becomes politically engaged, it responds to the existential and ontological challenges deeply rooted in the political discourse. It accounts for the political and denounces political rhetoric and propaganda. Its political analysis is not bereft of historical anamnesis and deconstructs the enthymeme of imperialists and corrupt politicians in order to account for the political. This uncovers the historical collusion between the missionary and colonialist, and the eventual and extensive interpenetration between the imperialists and local authorities, which leads to irrational dispositions and eventual suffering and poverty (Arnhart 1981:18–23, 49; Stinton 2004:27; Tillich 2014:55–57).

This task redefines hope to differentiate it from pejorative hope. Faith and political theology are integrated to transcend the imperialists' sphere of signification. This offers political hope, identifying the dialectical materialism disguised as service in the hands of politicians. It uncovers imperialism as the thesis and freedom as its antithesis. The unearthing of the imperialists' thesis culminates in a synthesis of freedom and emancipation as a *modus vivendi* that rejects the closure of political accountability and economic transformation (Biko 1978:51).

Christology, justice and liberation

Our task towards justice and liberation has been aided not only by the resistance and resilience of our ancestors, but also through critical engagement with the Christological question. Using our own epistemologies, we discover some titles that resonate with the Christological import and move away from the imperialists. The articulation of expansive Christological titles has undeniably shown that disfranchised voices offer critical interpretations of the Christological question. It contests that no single title of Jesus adequately addresses the soteriological import. Thus, the oppressed can identify Jesus as judge, Sophia, brother, or ancestor (Johnson 2002:157; Stinton 2004:55–62).

Today's conceptualisation of Christological titles in Zambia goes beyond ancestral veneration. Contextual Christological interpretation empowers them to identify Jesus as judge and attorney. We speak of Jesus as both judge and attorney, offering spatial and epistemic justice (Mlambo 2023:61). Thus, Jesus does not remain a foreigner, but is relatable to our existential challenges. However, Beyers and Mphahlele (2009:1–5) offer a concise and concrete direction on ancestral veneration, with three options: Yes, No, and Uncertainty. Although this does not provide closure, on the one hand, it contests the possibility of Jesus as a great ancestor. On the other hand, it denotes that it is incompatible and contradictory to the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

Beyond this, postcolonial Christology defies the legitimisation of colonial empire, and names it as responsible for Africa's ontological holocaust (Copeland 2018:39). The oppressed

differentiate the white light metaphor from dark moods to pragmatically confront the layers of imperialism. The white light metaphor is detached from the existential challenges and melts like wax when confronted with reality and anxiety. Differentiation is critical for attaining epistemic justice and denouncing epistemic injustice so that no one perishes (Alessandri 2023:35, 40–46).

New humanity and community: Hope and restoration

This new community is born out of an abridged metaphysics that recognises the interconnectedness of our ontological, epistemological, and cosmological spheres. These spheres are interwoven with the paradigm shifts that redirect our emancipatory discourse, making it inseparable from racial and political discourses. Calvin's Christology offers us an unabridged opportunity to discuss the humanity of black people as the *Imago Dei*, theologically in depth. His Christological anthropology addresses human restoration in relation to the ontological and metaphysical (revelatory) anthropology (Viazovski 2015:28, 35–36).

Imago Dei (African humanity) and hope

Our succinct exposition of John Calvin's anthropology shows that incarnation is the vantage point of his Christology. This theme does not escape black theologians. They recognise incarnation as the radical embodiment of God in African cultures. This contestation resonates with Karl Barth, who argued that humanity is mutually united with God through the covenant. Essentially, humanity is bound to God, the Ground of existence (Barth 1960:46; Cone 1997:77; Urbaniak 2018:180).

But what does it mean to be the *Imago Dei* for African peoples in their emancipatory journey? To rediscover its theological and soteriological import, we need to move beyond literal reading and interpretation of the biblical text. Drawing on experience as our epistemology, we discern shortcomings in the Eurocentric interpretation of the *Imago Dei*. The overt emphasis on dominion necessitated the doctrines of domination and discovery, which appropriated the humanity of the black people. But *Imago Dei* should be conceptualised as relational, functional, ontological, and substantial. In this way, *Imago Dei* transforms and affects human niche construction. Nonetheless, niche construction happens under a given niche. Thus, we become dialectical niche receptors and constructors, primarily to mirror God's reign. This contradicts the normalisation of systemic injustices that relegate oppressed peoples to disengaged, disembodied objects existing as discrete entities (Baloyi 2012:5; Henriksen 2023:76–80; Marumo 2019:2).

As such, *Imago Dei* is rooted in koinonia. This negates violence and subjugation by translating the immanent body of the other into the transcendent. It refutes othering and names it as a disfigurement of the *Imago Dei*. This task deconstructs not only imperialism but also African patriarchal systems that affect women and children (Cannon 1988:163; Gathogo 2021:2). The integration of these four models reconfigures and redirects our conceptualisation of the *Imago Dei* in the postlapsarian era. Dominion is interpreted in a spatiotemporal way to tend all things and criticise the unchecked consumerism bereft of social and ecological awareness (Lala 2025).

This affects the creator-creature-creation dance within the Anthropocene and anthropogenic spheres. Instead, we reorient ourselves to the sacredness of the other to denounce othering. Levinas, Gutiérrez, and many others offer the transcendent-immanent sacramentality of the other in their discourses. The other is unavoidably God's visibility and the interlocutor of the irreducible humanity that determines hope (Gutiérrez 1974:191–192; Levinas 2006:vii). However, the 'Other' and 'Stranger' is not only an immanent and transcendent person, who is an epiphany of God, but is also God (Veldsman 2018:215). This differentiation is the basis of political liberalism, which is immensely rooted in the electing love, purifying love, and creative love of God (Barth 1958:766–776). For Biko, Mdingi, and Frantz, it defines the epistemological and hermeneutical lens for liberation, courage to be on our emancipatory road, and integration and living of the rainbow community where blackness is not negated (Biko 1978:49; Frantz 2023:154; Mdingi 2023:88).

This reshapes the discourse of hope to be both existentially and eschatologically oriented. The connection of these spheres redefines the ontological conceptualisation of hope. It beckons us to rediscover the inseparability between eschatological and political hope. Here, we discover the hermeneutics of connection among the oppressed that reinforce hope as a vanguard against the threat of non-being forcefully imposed by imperialism. The threat and shock of non-being is overcome by trusting the Ground of Being as opposed to being palpable to nothingness (Olthuis 2022:157; Tillich 2014:35).

This hope is not divorced from the political body but negates solipsism, refutation of nothingness, and rejection of the downward movement of a 'being-toward-death'. Thus, pragmatic eschatological hope revolutionises by defying the construction of an intra-worldly or extra-worldly God, rather than the God of hope in the present and future (Levinas 2006:9, 41; Moltmann 1993:16). This drives the emancipatory agenda for the oppressed, which is not perceivable by the oppressors. In fact, oppressors recognise it as utopia or madness (Mdingi 2022:2, 6).

Thus, our eschatological hope is not amnesic of the past. Through our epistemology, we see things better than the sympathisers. Hence, we contend that until the world sees oppression as the oppressed, it will continue to lack a human face. Such hope contradicts and jeopardises the imperial project of assimilation and nihilism, becoming catalytic in redrawing the lines. This is primarily the new exodus and ecclesia for the oppressed. Ontologically, the new ecclesia is

black to liberate ecclesia from Eurocentric epistemological shortcomings (Katongole 2017:177; Mdingi 2020:6, 2023:87).

Christ's *kenosis* and power

Calvin's reflection on Christ's *kenosis* is rooted in his plural Christology and atonement theories. He does not favour any one theory for conveying the Christological import of Christ's *kenosis.* Prudently, Calvin (1960:II.16.4–5) regards atonement as the full expression of God's eternal love for the election of humanity. Christ, the immortal and righteous judge, was judged by the mortal and guilty judge for the redemption of humanity. Thus, Christ's *kenosis* restores the image of God in humanity (Calvin 1960:II. 17.6). However, African postcolonial Christology integrates both the ontological and existential spheres to reconsider and rediscover the soteriological import of Christ's *kenosis.* Christ's *kenosis* is perceived as the *kenosis* of dominating power and birthing liberating power. Undeniably, the cross of Jesus remains the critique of imperialism and power with powerless love that snatches victory out of death (Cone 2011:2).

It is powerless love that ushers in a new community where black people can imagine the Christ and denounce suffering as the datum of passion. Instead, Christ's *kenosis* is the datum that promotes the divine-human relationship. The oppressed reclaim their intrinsic status as undisfigured *Imago Dei*, and power is redefined to refuse domination in favour of power with. This exposes the hegemonic Christology that reinforces racist, sexist, and classist ideologies. It accounts for religious and political power as the oppressed seek emancipation (Carbine 2006:92–93, 100; Cone 2011:40–41). Ardently, Christ's *kenosis* is a critique of the singular, imperial vertical interpretation of atonement that jeopardises the ontological nature of humanity.

Christ's *kenosis* communicates the unromanticised truth that accords humanity equal opportunity, and challenges political reticence. Our unabridged metaphysics reconfigures Christ's *kenosis* as the upsetting of the imperial power that kept black economic clocks still (Biko 1978:142). It is the epitome of resistance for the oppressed, as they denounce political teratology, political rhetoric, and human determination viewed through the lens of the oppressor. This paradoxically communicates that Jesus not only assumed the slave nature, but became our poverty and liberation. Hence, Jesus is not only the *kenosis* of male patriarchy and imperialism but also the *kenosis* of egocentrism that dissociates itself from compassionate service and mutual empowerment (Gutiérrez 1974:266–267; Johnson 2002:160–161).

Regardless of the political face imperialism wears, the oppressed remain politically engaged rather than apolitical. They relate to the Christ event ontologically, epistemologically, and existentially to expose the overt triangulated interpenetration of the three arms of government and state, politics, and religion that leads to mobocracy instead of democracy. This overt interpenetration is the apex of abusive power that relegates the humanity of the oppressed to subhuman (Phiri 2006:190, 202–203; Stinton 2004:7). Hence, our Christological claim underscores that Christ's *kenosis* discloses Jesus' solidarity with the poor to offer spatial justice against spatial injustice, epistemic justice against epistemic injustice (Mlambo 2023:61).

In my PhD research,[5] I contended that *kenosis* of power holds the dialectical tension between the axiological preference and the preferential option for the oppressed. Our conceptual framework regards *kenosis* of power as both ethical and theological, redirecting theological action towards the freedom of the oppressed. This is grounded in the *kenosis* of Christ to unflinchingly assert the ethical and theological relevance of both the immanent and transcendent Christological affirmations.

Conclusion

My task has been to reflect on the critical themes of John Calvin's Christology. I reflected on these themes to create critical connections in our Christological reflections in the sub-Saharan postcolonial context. This deconstructs Eurocentric Christological interpretation to unravel imperial Christology. At the centre of this enterprise is a critical connection discovered among enlightenment, imperialism, and Christianisation, which produced lamentable results (Bediako 1995:6). But the focus was to move beyond unravelling imperial Christology. It exposed how Calvin becomes an interlocutor for critical Christological reflection that is existentially engaged, rather than reticent or apolitical.

This is the apex of postcolonial Christological inquiry. It accounts for the political in order to undeniably assert freedom as the prerequisite of a new community and ecclesia, full of life and koinonia (Gutiérrez 1974:145, 150). It provides a theological vanguard against exploitation and reinforces that *vox victimarum, vox Dei* – the cries of the victims are the voice of God amidst injustice (Boesak 2014:85–87, 114).

This trajectory redefines the meaning of being and recognises that the reconfiguration and reconceptualisation of the *Imago Dei* is the datum of the emancipatory narrative. Hope is never divorced from our humanity, but the two constitute a determinative force that refuses to be appropriated. Our hope is not simplistic eschatology. It is grounded in the realities but never dwarfs the promise of the new ecclesia. This is differentiated from the imperial hope that is detached from the past and is amnesic. Differentiation is the antithesis and antidote to the imperial project of extermination, assimilation, nihilism, or hopelessness.

Working with the three offices of Christ and his *kenosis,* we recognise that God sides and struggles with the oppressed. Thus, Christ's incarnation dynamically approves mutuality and denounces subjugation. This differentiation is the thesis of African postcolonial Christological signification. It is a new exodus. Binaries are broken; new (black) ecclesia is inaugurated.

5.See Chapter 6 of my PhD research.

It is a scandalous community to the imperialists as it gives black people the power to self-identify, self-resonate, self-determine, and self-affirm. Prudently, sub-Saharan African postcolonial critique refutes the closure of the Christological question, hope, and political discourse.

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Elijah Mwandila: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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