

The contextuality of African methods of biblical interpretation with particular reference to post-colonial interpretation and African feminist hermeneutics: Issues and challenges

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ABSTRACT: Today the Christian churches and Christianity are thriving in Africa as almost cannot be found elsewhere. There are at least 685 million Christians on the continent. While Christianity is traversing the multi-coloured cultures of Africa, points of departure from the old western classical interpretation of the Bible exist. The work employs the historical description of the Bible to analyse the post-colonial interpretation of the Bible and the African feminist hermeneutics. It highlights the strands, issues and challenges facing the interpretation of the Bible in African context. The work shows that such interpretation of the Bible are threatened by issues like syncretism, universalism, Christo-paganism, elitist and separatist tenor of feminist theology, and feminist liberation theology that is too far rooted in gender and sex issues without being sufficiently concerned with other issues that affect women which include: underdevelopment, hunger, disease, political, economic, and religious exploitation. The last twenty one years have witnessed more progress towards developing African Christian theology; interpreting the Bible in African context, than in the past century. Hence, the translation of the one faith of Jesus Christ to Africans being it's very nature and motif, and the terrain should be tread with caution.

Keywords: African Christian theology, Bible interpretation, feminism, present day cultural perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The Christian churches and Christianity are today thriving in Africa as almost nowhere else. Today there are at least six hundred and eighty-five million Christians on the continent (Global Christianity, 2018). Therefore, as Christianity is traversing the multi-coloured cultures of Africa, there is need for points of departure from the old western classical interpretation of the Bible, hence, the post-colonial interpretation of the Bible and the African feminist hermeneutics, using the historical descriptive method of study. This work aims at highlighting the strands, issues and challenges facing the interpretation of the Bible in the African context. It is evident that such interpretations of the Bible are threatened by a lot of issues such as syncretism, universalism, Christo-paganism, elitist and separatist tenor of feminist theology, and feminist liberation theology that is too far rooted in gender and sex

issues without being sufficiently concerned with other issues that affect women such as underdevelopment, hunger, disease, political, economic, and religious exploitation.

There has been more progress in the last twenty-one years toward developing African Christian theology (interpretation of the Bible in the African context) than in the previous century. According to Fashole-Luke, "the nature of the quest for African Christian theologies is to translate the one faith of Jesus Christ to suit the tongue, style, genius, character and culture of African people" (Fashole-Luke, 1978). Among the tasks to be tackled are 'the interpretation of the Bible in the African context'. It is fair to add, however, that since the beginning of the 20th century, attempts had been made to relate Christianity to the diverse social, cultural and political situations in West

Africa and Africa in general.

The aim of the interpretation of the Bible in the African context has been to present to the readers of the Bible, the way in which Africans participate in the Christian faith and try to express it. With this development, Africa is on the threshold of a new era. Expensive western structures inherited institutionalized religion will not remain forever. This is the point at which the churches in Africa need theoretical and practical help. Genuine African aspirations must come to the fore; imaginative and creative experiments should be carried out regardless of cost; innovation should be witnessed in all spheres of life, including services of worship. Schools of theology should not be patterned after European and American counterparts. Rather the teaching should be tuned to the demands of present day Africa in order to adequately respond to the beatings pulse of these changing times (WSCE Magazine, 1978).

It is against this backdrop that this work seeks to discuss the contextuality of African methods of Biblical interpretation with particular reference to post-colonial interpretation and African feminist hermeneutics, their issues and challenges and the way forward.

POST-COLONIAL INTERPRETATION

By post-colonial interpretation, it means the point of departure from the classical Euro-American methods of interpretation of the Bible to the interpretation of the Bible in the African context (Dube 2014). This has been rigorously pursued in the last decade, which amounts to attempting to make clear the fact that if Christianity is to change its status from that of resident alien to that of citizen, then it must become incarnate in the life and thought of African and its theologies must bear the distinctive stamp of nature of African thinking and reflection. What African theologies have been endeavouring to do is to draw together the various and disparate sources which make up the total religious experience of Christians in Africa into a coherent and meaningful pattern.

For instance, in the Republic of South Africa, African theology is equated with Black theology and the emphasis on blackness indicates the ethnic implications of the task; considerable attention is given there to the exposition of the Gospel in terms of liberation from political, social and economic injustice, and the creation of a new sense of dignity and equality in the face of white oppression and discrimination. It is surely at this critical point that African theologians are challenged by the Gospel to raise African Christian theologies above the level of ethnic or racial categories and emphases so that Christians everywhere will see that Christianity is greater and richer than any of its cultural manifestations and that the Gospel of liberation is for the oppressed and the oppressor alike (Anderson and Stranshy, 1978).

Contextuality of post-colonial biblical interpretation

Coe (1978) says contextuality is the critical assessment of what makes the content really significant in the light of the *Missio Dei*. It is the missiological discernment of the signs of the times, seeing where God is at work and calling us to participate in it. Thus, contextuality is more than just taking all contexts seriously but indiscriminately. It is the concretization of the contexts in a particular, historical moment, assessing the peculiarity of the context in the light of the mission of the church as it is called to participate in the *Missio Dei*. Such concretization can only come through involvement and participation, out of which critical awareness may rise. But it should also engender the capacity to respond and contextualize.

Authentic contextuality leads to contextualization. The two cannot be separated, though they should be distinct. This dialectic between contextuality and contextualization indicates a new way of theologizing. It involves not only words but actions. Authentic theological reflection can only take place as the *theologia in loco*, discerning the contextuality within the concrete context. But it must also be aware that such authentic theological reflection is at best, but also at most, *theologiaviatorum*; and therefore contextuality must be matched by the contextualization which is an ongoing process, fitting for the pilgrim people, moving from place to place and from time to time, in awareness that there is no abiding which is not subject also to the changes of time (Wilson, 2021). According to Kato:

Contextualization' is a new term imported into theology to express a deeper concept than 'indigenization' ever does. I understand the term to mean making concepts or ideas relevant in a given situation. In reference to Christian practices, it is an effort to express the never changing word of God in ever changing modes for relevance. Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary (Kato, 1985).

Accordingly, contextuality of biblical interpretation is making ideas relevant in concrete situations; this is to motivate us to make the Gospel relevant in every situation everywhere, without compromising it. Contextualization can take place in liturgy, dress, language, church service, and any other form of expression of the Gospel truth. Musical instruments such as organ and piano can be replaced or supplemented with such indigenous and easily acquired instruments like drums, cymbal and cornstalk instruments. It must be borne in mind of course, that the sound of music must not drown the message. Clergy do not have to wear a 'Geneva' gown or even a 'dog collar'. Not only should the message be preached in the language best understood by the congregation, but the terminology

of theology should be expressed the way the common people can understand.

Nevertheless, theological meaning must not be sacrificed on the altar of comprehension. While the content of God's word should remain what it is, the expression of it in teaching, preaching, and singing should be made relevant. Drama and story-telling, for instance, should be considered more seriously in Africa (Kato, 1985).

Furthermore, in case of the Eucharist, it is not out of place if the African "blood leaves" extract or African palm wine can replace wine (the fruit of the vine) and common bread or cassava cake to replace the bread (the unleavened bread). Tienou (1990) explains that contextualization more succinctly - Africa is not Europe, Europe is not America, and America is not Asia! Even within those continents there are various settings or contexts. Although they share some basic similarities, people are different. One cannot therefore just take Biblical theology and apply it anywhere!

The dynamic-equivalence method has in fact been utilized in the development of relevant Christian theologies. A contextual approach which takes seriously, both the biblical text and the cultural context, and lets God's spirit do his work, is best guaranteed against heresy. Thus, contextualization is defined a 'meaningful communication in forms that are real to the persons, and his full response to the Lord in repentance and obedience of faith that affects his whole life-style, his attitude, and his values and so on (Larkin, 1993).

Levels of contextualization in post-colonial interpretation

James Buswell traced out a full description of contextualization by delineating three levels in which it functions in a different culture. First, there is *inculturation*, the contextualization of the witness. Next, there is *indigenization*, the contextual of the church and its leadership. Finally, there is *ethnotheology*, the contextualization of theology by indigenous theologians (Buswell, 1993).

Inculturation

The interpreter must realize that though the contemporary context may use many of the same cultural symbols as did the biblical (e.g. foe, lambs), the same meanings no longer attach to them. "Contemporary exegetes (should)... experience life in contemporary cultures similar to those of biblical times. There is not ordinarily enough livingness to library-based exegesis to enable one to achieve the kind of personal identification with the scriptural authors in their cultures that such exegesis demands" (Larkin, 1993).

Indigenization

Historically, Christian missions were devoted to translating

biblical teachings on faith and life into culturally relevant forms in order to create a truly indigenized church in a particular society, a church which will be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. This missiology was addressed to Third World cultures and operated on the assumption that the Bible is the source of an eternal and in universally applicable message about what to believe about God and how to live in a way pleasing to him. Indigenization is matter of communicating the gospel message in culturally appropriate forms, the culture might provide the forms, but the Bible always provided the content and the meaning (Lewis, 2005)

Ethnotheology

As the word indicates, ethnotheology combines two disciplines, Christian's theology and anthropology, and it is an interpretive approach to the study of God, humankind, and divine-human interaction. From anthropology it draws culturally relative truths and perceptions about how meaning is communicated within a culture and between cultures, and from theology come culturally relative understandings of absolute supracultural conditions for receiving that provision - faith (Kraft, 1993).

Trends in post-colonial interpretation

According to Mbiti (1978), the summary of post-colonial interpretation is *survival*. It is from this concern that trends of post-colonial interpretation emerge as follows:

National survival

Racism, segregation, ethnicism, nepotism, corruption, and domestic violence are national ills which afflict every country in Africa. That our countries are poor in relation to many others goes almost without saying, is it not necessary to have a theology of economics, poverty, exploitation, natural resources and their utilization: certainly, contextual theologizing to touch on such national issues is necessary so as to help our national survival.

Community survival

In African countries, there are tribes, clans, political parties, age groups, school communities, and men's and women's associations. There is a communal bond existing in African societies such that if anything happens to a member of the community the whole community life is equally affected. Africa is prone to drought, famine, pestilence, calamities, epidemics, and pandemics (HIV/AIDS) and (Covid-19). All these threaten the survival of the community. The church has to formulate a more inclusive theology, - It is the opinion of this work that those

engaged in post-colonial biblical interpretation and African feminist hermeneutics should tread the terrain with caution. They should not sacrifice the “divine biblical values and principles” on the altar of inculturation, indigenization, contextualization, gender and sexism. The truth of the word of God that makes men and women free moral beings should not meddle with the theology of rain-making, insect pestilence and road engineering because its members are concerned about these issues.

Personal survival

A lot of issues are concerned on the subject of individual beings – health and healing, slums, and housing, school fees and money for clothes and food; unemployment, family concerns (especially for children and parents), witchcraft, magic, and sorcery. Theology of healing, spirit possession, dreams and visions are very relevant in the post-colonial interpretation.

Exploitation, disease, abject poverty, and deprivation of the basic necessities of life have been the lot of the majority of African people. But what is the cause of these human tragedies? Would man’s problems be solved after the alleviation of physical suffering and material deprivation? Is putting clothes on a man’s back and food in his stomach the way to solve man’s basic needs? Is political liberation the final answer? Man’s root problem is beyond these issues. Every inch of the African continent may be liberated from foreign domination, every family may have two cars in the garage, and every African may be a college graduate, but that still will not save the African from his fundamental dilemma. These current ills will only be replaced with new and probably worse tragedies.

The nature of man’s fundamental dilemma does not lie in mere physical suffering. It does not lie primarily in horizontal relationships with his fellow man. All human tragedies, be they sickness, poverty, or exploitation, are mere symptoms of the cause, which the Bible calls sin. It is very sad to note that some key leaders in Africa take these symptoms for the cause, which the Bible calls sin. Therefore, it should be the preoccupation of the church, theologians and scholars in Africa to interpret the Bible in the light of the incarnate Christ who died and rose again for our redemption. Christ only can give liberation and complete freedom to mankind.

Challenges/threats to post-colonial interpretation

Post-colonial interpretation and biblical Christianity in Africa are being threatened by syncretism, universalism, and Christo-paganism. The spiritual battle for Africa during this decade will be fought, therefore, largely on theological grounds. Kato (1985) mentions some of them amongst others as follows:

1. The prevailing wind of religious relativism in the older churches of the West is being carried abroad by the

- liberal missionaries in person and through literature.
2. Political awareness in Africa carries with its search for ideological identity. Some theologians seek to find this identity in African traditional religions.
3. Emotional concerns for the ancestors who died before the advent of Christianity forced some theologians to call for recognition of the religious practices of pre-Christian idol worshipers.
4. Cultural Revolution promotes a return to the traditional socio-religio-cultural way of life in Africa. Since it is hard to separate culture from religion, the tendency is to make them identical cling to idolatrous practices as being an authentic way of life.
5. Inadequate biblical teaching has left the average Christian with an inability to ‘rightly handle the word of truth’. Syncretism or neo-orthodox teachers bring their views, and even Christian leaders fail to discern what is right according to the teaching of God’s word.
6. The study of comparative religions, without the affirmation of the uniqueness of Christianity, has helped produce theologian of syncretism.
7. The legitimate desire to make Christianity truly African has not been matched with the discernment not to tamper with the inspired inerrant content of the revealed word of God.

The Christian churches and Christianity are today thriving in Africa as almost nowhere else. The era of missions, in which Christianity in Africa was seen as a plant which had hardly taken root, which needed constant care from outside, which it was a duty to instruct but to which one would certainly not expect to listen-that era is over. Today there are at least six hundred and eighty-five million Christians on the continent of Africa and the number is steadily growing (Global Christianity, 2018) this is against ninety million as earlier observed in the seventies (Hastings, 1976).

Therefore, as Christianity is traversing the multi-coloured cultures of Africa there is a need for a point of departure from the old Western classical interpretation of the Bible to the post-colonial interpretation of the Bible- the socio-cultural dimension- so as to benefit from the word of God. Obviously, Christianity in its various manifestations does not stand or fall with Western culture.

As God’s church is composed of a mosaic of people, so Christianity can wear a multi-coloured cultural garb. Theologians should study our own culture, the culture of the biblical world and Western culture. To be a good theologian in Africa requires that one be competent in the traditional theological disciplines and also well read in cultural anthropology and sociology. Theologians also need to examine African culture very closely to see what elements are compatible or incompatible with the gospel message. They must resist the temptation of making absolute our interpretations of scriptures. Theologians must trust God’s spirit to guide the African church into all truth, provided she abides in God’s word (John 14: 26 and 16:13).

AFRICAN FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

Feminism is basically an emerging understanding of life in the light of the experiences and insight of women. Those who consider themselves feminist today are women who belong to feminists movements and are motivated by an ideology termed “*feminist consciousness*” which was coined about the middle of the 20th century AD in the United States of America. By feminist consciousness, it is meant to create awareness that the oppression of women is systemic and structural in nature. Feminists identify the oppressive systems as *patriarchy*. They make a total commitment to actively redress the oppression of women in any form, especially that of changing the structures of patriarchy in society. Patriarchy means the general socio-cultural belief that the male sex is the norm of humanity while the female sex is secondary, inferior to the male, and must be kept subservient to the male. Patriarchy is believed, to ensure that every aspect of human history, philosophy, religion, etc. is understood and expressed in the light of the experiences and insight of men (Bergmann, 2021).

In being conscious of the role of patriarchy, feminists insist that women are oppressed because they are in a system, which is being subtly or overtly controlled and manipulated by men for their own advantage. Feminists thus strongly advocate for the recognition and inclusion of the feminine perceptible in all spheres of life, so as to checkmate patriarchy, and thus liberate women from its clutches (Umoren, 2006). It follows therefore that African feminist hermeneutics are proponents of the liberation of women from the dominant male chauvinists in Africa. They use the Christian religion as a basis for their theology aiming at bringing African women to be recognized in Christian churches as equal to men.

‘Feminist consciousness’ which started in the United States of America has by now spread to all the nooks and crannies of the globe including Africa. Women in Africa today are equally and seriously agitating for the liberation of the womenfolk from male dominance both economically, politically, socially and religiously.

Expressions of feminist hermeneutics

The general ideological standpoint of feminism finds expression in different forms or strands as supported by feminist scholars. Thus there have emerged the following:

Liberal feminists are primarily concerned with the political and legal situation of women in society, and how to achieve equal rights for women in socio-political contexts (Lewis, 2019).

Cultural feminists are those who struggle for the equal and mutual influence of men and women in cultural transformation. They engage in social reforms in society,

seeking a better and more human system by injecting the voice of women into society (Lewis, 2019).

Socialist feminists are influenced by Marxism, and so they see the economic class structure, whereby the male controls the public means of production, as the fundamental structure of oppression and domination of women, leaving women in the private sphere of production. Socialist feminists would maintain that class oppression of women is more powerful than oppression on account of sex (Lewis, 2019).

Radical feminists see patriarchy not merely as bringing about male domination of females, but as the domination of both sexes since everyone and everything in a family comes under the head of the family, a man (Napikoski, 2020).

Religious feminists are those theologians who focus on the place of patriarchy in the religious system, such as Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They seek to liberate the religious system from patriarchy by identifying relationships and distinctions between God and humanity, religion and church, theology and spirituality, liturgy and ritual, the word of God and literature (Fiorenza, 1996).

Eco Feminism - This form of feminism is said to be “a part of Green politics. It attempts to draw apparel between women and nature, religion and literature and also seeks to establish the connection between the two. The scope of this form of feminism is broad and dynamic and emphasizes the fact that both women and nature must be protected at all cost” (Team Leverage Edu, 2021).

African feminist hermeneutics

African women theologians, while identifying with the African reality and the overall liberation theological concerns canvassed mostly by their male counterparts, note that sadly, it is African women that ultimately bear the brunt of the exploitation of Africa by outsiders although the oppression of women also has roots in Africa’s patriarchal cultural structures. The major liberation theological task for African women lies in reclaiming their theological heritage, which has been overtaken by men, given the fact that in traditional Africa, women were theologians in their own right, and were deeply involved in traditional spirituality and religious rites. They aspire to use their theological endowments for the liberation of women and men in Africa.

African women’s liberation theology has many frontline proponents, who include Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Teresa Okure, Rose Uchem, Louise Tappa, Rose Zoe-Obianga and Bette Ekeya. To these theologians, the African women are in many ways struggling in the soil of the African society against the situation because African women are

often treated as less than human. Their role is dominantly that of mother and wife. They are regarded as the property of men, and kept out of important decision-making. Women are exploited economically even though they generate and save a lot of family income. They are marginalized in some Christian assemblies and schemed out of political relevance. They are victims of gender stereotyping, such that women are always expected to perform tasks that are reserved for women, such as cooking and other household chores. They are often blamed for the evils in society and particularly of the family, even when they are innocent. With impunity, many African women are denied certain fundamental human rights, such as the right to education, freedom of movement, freedom of association, choice of a life partner, inheritance, and ownership of some properties (Ekeya, 1998).

African women liberation theologians point at patriarchy as the most oppressive structure being used against the full realization of womanhood in Africa. Moreover, centuries of negative biblical interpretation against women, especially in the story of creation and fall, have created a socio-religious bias against women today, and have been used to justify an inferior role and status assigned to women. African women liberation theologians seek out and amplify liberative elements in the scriptures while discounting the humanly oppressive elements in it. According to Okure, "the liberative elements emphasize the woman's equality with the man, her being made conjointly with him in the image and likeness of God, of equal dignity and honour, and her being given the special privilege, akin to God's, of bearing, mothering, and fostering life" (Okure, 1988).

Moreover, the African women, finding themselves hemmed in from all sides, find liberation hope in the practices, teaching and suffering of Jesus Christ. In his condition, he bears the conditions of the weak and oppressed, hence that of women. He shows a great interest in the condition of women, and therefore, African women are very interested in Jesus as a personal friend, a companion, the voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless, and a critic of the status quo.

Major issues in African feminist hermeneutics

African feminist liberation theology shares the basic view that in the Bible, God abhors any form of oppression, and God seeks to liberate the oppressed, an act that God carries out definitively through Jesus Christ. However, feminist liberation theologians note that the same Bible, written and traditionally interpreted from the perspective of patriarchy, has become a major source of women's oppression and subjugation. In order that the Bible would adequately fulfil its liberative role, the authentic word of God must be liberated of its patriarchal traditional bias, and a more inclusive theology that takes cognizance of, and incorporates are, therefore, some of the major themes that

emerge from feminist liberation theology (Umoren, 2006).

Biblical interpretation from a feminist perspective

Can the Bible still be regarded as an inspired and authoritative word of God despite its sexist bias? This concern has led to the development of creative approaches to biblical interpretation from a feminist perspective. Thus, feminists look for positive biblical texts about women, in order to counteract famous texts "against" women. They reinterpret famous biblical texts against women from the perspective of women's experiences, they look at biblical texts about women, to learn from the intersection of the stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures, and they look at texts that promote liberation. "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Proverbs 31:30), "God is in the midst of her; God will not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns" (Psalm 46:5), "She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong" (Proverbs 31:16-17). Frere has 15 Bible verses about women that show their strength (Frere, 2019). Biblical interpretations carried out from this perspective would usually revolve around contextual theological, socio-cultural and ecclesial issues. The idea is to liberate the scriptures and its interpretation from the predominantly male grip that it has been, under over the centuries, and give it a new meaning, which includes the concerns of women.

Rejection of patriarchy

Of all the feminist liberation theological issues, the rejection of patriarchy is the most dominant. Patriarchy is a social system whereby the male is regarded as the dominant sex while the female is regarded as secondary, subordinate and inferior. Within the patriarchal system, women are expected to be of complete service to men. Patriarchy leads to complete service to men. Patriarchy leads to androcentrism (male-centeredness) sexism (male oppression) and genders stereotyping. This is because besides the rightful assumption of male or female biological roles, the male is socialized into conformity with perceived "masculine" standards, and the women are expected to act in conformity with what society identified as "feminine".

In rejecting patriarchy, feminists seek liberation from patriarchal oppression, which devalues the female. They see such oppression as not being in consonance with the liberative acts of God and Jesus and not being in consonance with the liberating message of the scriptures. Therefore, patriarchy has to be rejected where it is found in the scriptures, in order that the true word of God may be experienced. Thus, feminist liberation theologians

advocate for gender equality, as opposed to either patriarchy or matriarchy. This position is inspired by the creation account, where God created humanity equal as male and female (Genesis 1:27), and by the Pauline passage which declares the equality of peoples in Christ. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

A new image of God

Feminist liberation theologians seek liberation from the presumption that God is male, rather than pure spirit. As Spirit, God is neither male nor female. However, images that are characteristically both male and female are used by God (Job 38:29; Isaiah 42:14; Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 66:13). Feminist liberation theologians, therefore, seek out new and inclusive images of God. One cannot have one sex as the image of God since such an image would be incomplete. It is as both males and females that humanity is the image of God (Genesis 1:27; Marecek, 2019)

Inclusiveness

This is the overall guiding principle of feminist liberation theology. Inclusiveness involves inclusive theology, inclusive language, incisive ecclesial ministry, and inclusive responsibilities. Inclusiveness takes both men and women into account in every life context and promotes the equality of men and women. Through inclusive theology, women are liberated from academic exclusiveness, whether the experience, contributions and concerns of women did not feature as part of theological heritage. Through the use of inclusive language, women do not feel discriminated against whether in the church or society at large. With such sensitivity in language, women are liberated from the alienation that exclusive language has always forced them into. Feminist liberation theology seeks to develop an inclusive English language vocabulary and other languages that will encourage the use of gender language. Through inclusive ecclesial ministry, women seek liberation from exclusive male leadership in those ecclesial communities where this is operative. They also seek inclusion in decision making, especially on issues that affect their lives. Such inclusiveness would facilitate co-responsibility in all things (Marecek, 2019).

The practice of African feminist hermeneutics

African feminist liberation theology promotes an inclusive liberation theology of women in the light of the liberating message of the scriptures. It does this, also in recognition

of the fact that more than half of the oppressed poor and hungry in the world are women and children who depend on them. African feminist liberation theologians, therefore, practice liberation theology, based on the acknowledgement and analysis of their own experience of oppression as women in sexist, cultural and theological contexts. As a result, they cannot claim to engage in a value-materials, detached stance of Latin American liberation theologians, who are themselves not poor or oppressed but "altruistically" make the cause of the poor and oppressed their own. Rather, as women who themselves experience oppression; they do their theology from the actual dimension of their own oppression. They come to theology from their living context as oppressed women.

Furthermore, African feminist liberation theologians maintain that the Bible and traditional Christian theology through the age are inherently sexist, and as such, are not helpful to women's consciousness. It is only when one comprehends how the Bible and traditional Christian theology have been used in the oppression of women that one can prevent the misuse of the Bible for further oppression.

In practising biblical liberation theology, feminists insist that oppressive and destructive biblical traditions are not authoritative. They seek, rather, to rediscover and use those positive biblical traditions and interpretations that have transcended their oppressive cultural and patriarchal contexts. Furthermore, biblical texts that have been traditionally misinterpreted with a deliberate bias towards fostering the oppression of women are reinterpreted to show instead the truth of their liberating power.

Like their Latin American counterparts, African feminist liberation theologians engage in an *option for the poor, but specifically in an "option for poor women"*. They see poor women as those excluded among the excluded. Thus, women's poverty and oppression become the norm of oppression and poverty. Women groups meet regularly as Christians of base communities, ministers or theologians, in order to discuss liberation in relation to the scriptures, from women's angle (Batthyany et al., 2005).

Major challenges of African feminist hermeneutics

One of the most serious challenges of feminist liberation theology is that it is elitist and separatist. As a result, some women theologians have distanced themselves from it and preferred a "*womanist*" theology. These women theologians, drawn largely among North American Black and Hispanic minority women felt, according to Okure, "that the white woman's approach addressed the issue of sex but not sufficiently those of class and race" (Okure, 1993).

Although the issues focused on are basically the same, African women theologians tend towards using a womanist approach to liberation theology rather than a feminist approach. According to Okure, the womanist approach:

Has the distinctive characteristic of inclusiveness. It describes the efforts of women and men to interpret the scriptures as they relate to women, in a common search for new inclusive meanings. In this respect, it differs from the strictly feminist approach, which excludes the possibility of men being able to offer a valid interpretation of scripture as it relates to women. The ...approach is inclusive of scholars and non scholars, the rich and the poor, it is inclusive of the 'scientific', the creative, and the popular method (Okure, 1993; p. 77).

The critique is thus made by African women theologians that feminist liberation theology is too far rooted in gender and sex issues, without being sufficiently concerned about other issues that affect women, especially in third world contexts, such as underdevelopment, hunger, disease political, economic and religious exploitations, the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Accordingly, African women liberation theologians insist that they cannot afford to divorce their legitimate quest for a liberating theology from the wider quest for liberation for the African peoples (Okure, 1993). Based on a rejection of patriarchy, the feminist biblical "hermeneutics of suspicion" approach to biblical interpretation has also come under challenges by ecclesiastical scholars. Accordingly, a Vatican document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, states:

Feminist exegesis, to the extent that it proceeds from a pre-conceived judgement, runs the risk of interpreting the biblical texts in a tendentious and thus debatable manner. To establish its positions, it must often, for want of something better, have recourse to arguments "ex silentio". As is well known, this type of argument is generally viewed with much reserve: it can never suffice to establish a conclusion on a solid basis. On the other hand, the attempt made, on the basis of fleeting indications in the texts, to reconstitute on historical situation, which these same texts are considered to have been designed to hide - this does not correspond to the work of exegesis so called. It entails rejecting the content of the inspired texts in preference for a hypothetical construction, quite different in nature (Adewale, 2009).

Conclusion

Modern feminist theology is said to have begun in 1968 with the work of Kari Borresen, a Norwegian, who critiqued the masculinity bias of classical theology. The same year Mary Daly exposed the sexist bias of the entire Christian tradition in *The Church and the Second Sex*. These and many other writings which followed have sought to establish that in the past, theology had been done to the

exclusion of the concerns of women and that the Bible was traditionally interpreted in ways that did not consider the positive contributions of women.

Besides, feminist liberation theologians discuss all forms of sexist oppression, subordination and degradation of women, evaluating and challenging them in the light of the liberating message of the gospel. Feminist liberation theology has gained lots of adherents all over the world and is currently beginning to exercise a major effect on the way theology is done. In Africa, this is no different, hence, the African feminist hermeneutics. From the foregoing, therefore, this paper had discussed the contextuality of biblical interpretation with particular reference to post-colonial interpretation. It examined also levels of contextuality and trends in post-colonial interpretation. Threats and challenges against post-colonial interpretation have also been discussed. Major issues in feminist liberation have been discussed. The practice and challenge of African feminist liberation theology have also been examined.

Therefore, it is the opinion of this work that those engaged in post-colonial biblical interpretation and African feminist hermeneutics should tread the terrain with caution. They should not sacrifice the "divine biblical values and principles" on the altar of inculturation, indigenization, contextualization, gender and sexism. The truth of the word of God that makes men and women free should not be tampered with.

Recommendations

Based on this work, the following recommendations are made:

1. Divine biblical values and principles should not be sacrificed on the altar of inculturation, indigenization, contextualization, gender and sexism.
2. The attempt to change the image of God, *imago dei*, to the female sex should be avoided.
3. Outright rejection of patriarchy by feminist hermeneutics would tantamount to the rejection of God's sovereignty. The biblical *status quo* should be maintained.
4. The truth of the Word of God that makes men and women free should not be tampered with.
5. Inculturation, indigenization, and contextualization that enhance syncretism and Christo-paganism should not be accepted.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that they have no conflict of interests.

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