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Social Transformation in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

by David Kirwa Tarus

Abstract

Social transformation in Africa has always been of interest to theologians. In the context of the growing focus on the role of women in ministry, society, and theology, this article looks into the contribution of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter, the Circle) to the theology of social transformation. The article reveals that the Circle theologians situate their theology of social transformation around six theological themes (Theology of God, Christian Anthropology, Theology of Scripture, Theology of Christ, Theology of the Church, and Eschatology) which they reexamine, redefine, and remodel to suite their theological agenda which is to transform the African continent into a humanizing continent. The article begins with a brief history of the Circle and the theological methods they employ. It then focuses on the six theological themes that shape their theology of social transformation.

Introduction

In the eyes of the world, Africa is a continent of untold problems and suffering. It has been “branded” as a “marketplace,” “dark continent,” “a land of shadow and mystery,” “a land of atrocities,” “the traumatized continent,” “the emerging continent,” “a dark hole,” and other labels. George Kinoti in his book, *Hope for Africa and What the Christian can Do*, laments that the story of Africa reads “like a chronicle of perpetual doom.”¹ Considering the perilous situation that Africa is facing, it is important to explore every possible resource to address this challenge, including theology. Since the 1960s male theologians have dominated African academic theology. However, African women theologians have for the last thirty years entered the scene to articulate their perspectives, especially in regard to social transformation of the African continent. This article examines the themes that shape the Circle theology of social transformation of the African continent. Before exploring the themes, a brief historical overview of the Circle is necessary.

Introducing the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians

Mercy Amba Oduyoye founded The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 in Accra, Ghana. Oduyoye is widely regarded as Africa’s leading female theologian, and the most published African woman theologian. Other key women who have been in the helm of leadership of the Circle include Musimbi Kanyoro from Kenya and Isabel Phiri from Malawi.

¹ George Kinoti, *Hope for Africa and What the Christian Can Do* (Nairobi: AISRED, 1994), 14.

The Circle is a pan-African, multi-religious, and multi-racial society of women who share the same agenda, that is, “to undertake research and publish theological literature” in the fields of theology and culture. Indeed, publishing is perhaps Circle theology’s greatest achievement. The Circle website notes that Circle theologians have published more than three hundred books on various issues of theology and Christianity in Africa. This is a notable contribution considering the challenge of limited research funds and inadequate libraries in Africa. Kanyoro broadly explains the difficulties that African women theologians have to overcome in order to publish:

Many simply have no time to sit and write long treatises with all the footnotes and quotations from a million other scholars. Many have no access to books and libraries as money is a problem and theological books are expensive on our continent. Those who pass judgment on African women as a people lacking in theological expression or reflection need to hear and read our choked silence. In some instances, the seeming silence may well be a strategized expression of protest. It may also be an expression of despair, anger, overloaded systems and the other circumstances which continually weigh us down.²

One of the key motivations for starting the Circle was the absence of women’s theology in African Christian theology. Circle theologians compared African theology at that time to a bird with only one wing noting that African theology was missing the perspective of African women. The Circle therefore sought to supply African theology with the missing dimension, creating, “a two-winged theology.”³ They express their goal as “to make Theology in Africa fly by equipping it with the missing wing. A bird with one wing does not fly.”⁴ Musimbi Kanyoro asserts that, “African theology without the faith story of African women is a theology that is incomplete and contextually inept.”⁵

It is also important to point out one catalyst of African women theology – the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), launched at Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in August 1976. The first assembly of EATWOT met in New Delhi, India, in 1981. Even though Third World women theologians were part of the contributors of EATWOT, Oduyoye laments, “our voices were not being heard, although we were visible enough. ... We demanded to be heard. The result was the creation within EATWOT of a Women’s

² Musimbi Kanyoro, “African Women’s Quest for Justice: A Review of African Women’s Theology,” *The Pacific Journal of Theology* 15, no. 15 (1996): 85–86.

³ For an excellent history of the Circle, the notable contribution that Oduyoye played in it, and the various issues that the Circle seeks to address, see, Nyambura Njoroge, “A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians,” *Missiology: An International Review* 33, no. 1 (2005): 29–46.

⁴ <http://www.thecirclecawt.org/profile.html> accessed on October 19th 2013.

⁵ Musimbi Kanyoro, “Threading More Beads in the Story of the Circle” in Isabel A. Phiri, Sarojini Nadar, eds., *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 39.

Commission.”⁶ The Commission was mandated to work on ways of integrating women voices into Third-World theologies. After several regional, national and continental consultations, women theologians had their first international meeting in Mexico in December 1986. One of the results was the publication of *With Passion and Compassion* by Virginia Fabella and Mercy Oduyoye. The first section of the book contains essays by African women theologians on different areas of theology, Christianity, and culture. EATWOT was the seedbed of African feminist theology through which their theology germinated and blossomed to what we see today.

Circle theologians employ various methodologies when they theologize. First, they use narrative theology. African women theologians accept story as a source of theology. They are aware of the primary role of stories in Africa’s oral corpus and so build on that resource for developing their theologies. Second, Circle theologians “adopt a perspectival approach rather than analysis and critique of existing works.”⁷ Their theology is perspectival because its intention is to share the point of view of African women on issues that affect them. Their theology is therefore highly experiential. Their experiences (personal or communal) as women and as Africans shape their theology. Third, Circle theology is multicultural, multi-religious and multi-racial. It is intentionally dialogue-oriented and pluralistic in approach. The main dialogue partners for Christian Circle theologians are their counterparts in African Traditional Religion and African Indigenous churches. Fourth, Circle theology is highly communal. Oduyoye asserts that African women’s theology is “a theology of relations” because “African culture is very community-oriented.”⁸ They believe that they should do theology from the perspective of community, which is perhaps why they engage in practically oriented theology. Five, and perhaps most important, is that Circle theology is greatly shaped by feminist perspectives, though they prefer to refer to their work as African women theologies. Isabel Phiri also notes that other titles such as “Circle Theology”, “Communal Theology”, “Bosati theology” or “African Women theology” have been chosen as an alternative to “feminist theology.”⁹ This is

⁶ Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology; Reflections from the Women’s Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), x.

⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 11.

⁸ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 17.

⁹ Isabel Apawo Phiri, “The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians: Its Contribution to Ecumenical Formation,” *Ecumenical Review* 57, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 39. Kanyoro prefers the terminology “engendered communal theology” to explain the theology being done by African women theologians, in “Engendered Communal Theology: African Women’s Contribution to Theology in the Twenty-first Century” in Kwok Pui-lan, *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women’s Theology*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), 27. Ogbu U. Kalu notes that an alternative

because of the negative connotation that the term “feminist” bears in Africa. Nevertheless, as Oduyoye has noted, the term “feminist” is often preferred because of its global familiarity.¹⁰ Therefore, Circle theology can be termed as feminist theology from an African context. Oduyoye defines feminism:

Feminism has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women’s experience should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being human. It highlights the woman’s world and her worldview as the struggles side by side with the man to realize her full potential as a human being... Feminism then emphasizes the wholeness of the community as made up of male and female beings... Feminism calls for the incorporation of the woman into the community of interpretation of what it means to be human.¹¹

Whatever their method, African women theologians are concerned with making theology relevant for life. Their concern is to change the world especially in regard to how women are treated, or should be treated. Circle theologians have contributed immensely to social transformation in Africa. In the words of a respected South African theologian, Circle “theology is mounting a critique of both African culture and African Christianity in ways that previous African theologies have not been able to do.”¹² This group cannot be ignored in any discussion of African voices doing theology.

Themes That Shape the Circle’s Theology of Social Transformation

Having briefly traced the formation, development, and methodology of the Circle, we turn now to an exploration of six theological themes that shape their theology of social transformation.

1. Theology of God

That God exists is taken for granted in Africa. Philosophical or theological explications of the existence of God are not major concerns in African theology. It is the same for African women theologians. They start their arguments from the perception that God exists in trinity and in a relational way. They contend that a Trinitarian, relational understanding of God helps shape community.¹³ In other words, they assert that the diversity of God is a model for social interaction. It is this fact that Circle theologians have capitalized on to construct communal theology. Also from the diversity of God, Circle theologians build a theology of hospitality where they emphasize such themes

terminology for “feminist” theology is *sister* theology. See, Phiri and Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 264–265.

¹⁰ See Oduyoye, “Feminist Theology in an African Perspective,” in Rosino Gibellini, ed., *Paths of African Theology*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 167.

¹¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 121.

¹² Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “Half a Century of African Christian Theologies: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 99 (1997): 22.

¹³ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 136.

as caring, providing, helping, ministering, and sharing with all in need.¹⁴ It is this spirit of hospitality that encourages Circle theologians to collaborate to work towards a better world.¹⁵

Circle theologians' theology of God is therefore rooted in a practical understanding of the Trinity. Oduyoye argues that the doctrine of God must go beyond metaphysical understanding to an "ethical function of the Trinity."¹⁶ For Mercy Oduyoye, an ethical conception of God has serious practical significance for Africans because in light of the history of suffering, "a theology divorced from ethical demands would have little relevance in Africa."¹⁷

Circle theologians argue that God redeems nations and individuals from sin, oppression, injustices and all manner of dehumanizing structures. They affirm that the God of the Bible acts within human history, and that God sides with the oppressed. They argue that God does not discriminate on any basis of gender, race or ethnicity. Circle theologians therefore re-interpret what they believe to be male dominated imageries about God that are found in the Scripture and other literatures. They argue that salvation, redemption, liberation and reconciliation are one activity of God. From the Exodus event, they posit redemption that is more than a spiritual experience but a holistic experience. In the Exodus event they see salvation of the entire human being from sin and all other forms of oppression.¹⁸ They therefore derive their motivation for social justice in the God of Exodus, a God who liberates humanity from sin and oppression.

They assert that God is ever present and works in and through his people to correct injustice. They posit that the God of the Bible is concerned with liberating or saving humanity from oppressive human or inhuman forces. Oduyoye writes, "God is concerned for the wholeness of our *be-ing* and for our relationship to God and to other human beings."¹⁹ Margaret Umeagudosu writes, "God to most Africans is beyond morality, that is, capable of good and evil, and can wreak vengeance on both the guilty humans and spirits."²⁰ In

¹⁴ Musimbi Kanyoro, "God Calls to Ministry: An Inclusive Hospitality," in Musimbi Kanyoro and Njoroge, eds., *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, (Nairobi: Acton, 1996), 149–162.

¹⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, "Mercy Amba Oduyoye and African Women's Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1, (March 1, 2004): 22.

¹⁶ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 140.

¹⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, Theology in Africa Series, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), 16.

¹⁸ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 8–10.

¹⁹ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 23.

²⁰ Margareth Umeagudosu, "The Earth Belongs to God: Biblical Expositions through the Eyes of a Nigerian Woman", in Elizabeth Amoah, ed., *Where God Reigns: Reflections on Women in God's World*, (Accra: Samwoode Publishers, 1997), 12.

summary, in Circle theology the Triune God is the only hope of social transformation of humanity; without God there is no social transformation.

2. Christian Anthropology

In Christian anthropology, Circle theologians attempt to re-evaluate the Christian understanding of anthropology to address oppression. They address two major questions: “What does it mean to be human?” and, “how should we respond to the problem of evil?”

On answering the first question, they center their anthropology on the affirmation that male and female are created in the image of God. They critique reading of the Scriptures that demote women to second-class citizens or to a level not human. They contend that the fact that humanity is created in God’s image is a motivation for social action or social transformation. Oduyoye holds that at the center of oppression is “our distortion of our God-likeness.”²¹ She argues that the responsibility for healing our brokenness falls on men and women, and that we must “explore anew our human Be-ing and to affirm each one’s mode of being human.”²² True healing of communities cannot happen if human beings are not “authentic reflectors of the Image of God.”²³ In reflecting the image of God, human beings express their humanness and beauty.

Oduyoye in an article titled *Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction* asserts that, “If one is in the image of God, then one is expected to practice the hospitality, compassion, and justice that characterize God.”²⁴ She also writes, “No one can claim to be in the image of God who is insensitive to the cry of the afflicted, who invests in structures of domination, or supports them because of vested interests.”²⁵ True human living includes consideration of the other person, we cannot live in isolation, and “it is only in community that our humanity means anything.”²⁶ Elizabeth Amoah, a notable theologian from Ghana, asserts that what is needed in addressing African conflicts is an anthropology which “puts to test our maturity as human beings... a search for re-defining our humanity and our relationship with God and with each other.”²⁷

Mercy Oduyoye strongly argues that Christian anthropology must take seriously African culture that recognizes life as life-in-community. She writes, We can truly know ourselves if we remain true to our community, past and present. The concept of individual success or failure is secondary. The ethnic group, the village, the locality, are crucial in one’s estimation of oneself. Our

²¹ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 132.

²² Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 135.

²³ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 135.

²⁴ Mary John Mananzan et al., eds., *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 170.

²⁵ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 137.

²⁶ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 141.

²⁷ Elizabeth Amoah in Virgilio P. Elizondo and Jon Sobrino, eds., *2000: Reality and Hope*, (London: SCM, 1999), 16–17.

nature as beings-in-relation is a two-way relation: with God and with our fellow human-beings.²⁸

In addition to affirming that men and women are created in God's image and that this theology should shape social relationships, the Circle affirms that human beings are called upon to exercise their dominion over the earth in a God-glorifying manner. They contend that human beings are called to work for *shalom* in the world. They understand *shalom* to be concrete and holistic, "Peace is not only a matter in the human community, it also has to do with our relationship to the world," Oduyoye writes.²⁹ Hence, social engagement does not ignore the relationship between humanity and the social environment.

The second major point on theological anthropology presented by Circle theologians is the problem of evil. They argue that Christian anthropology must develop theologies that address structural and personal evils in the society. Their beginning point in addressing the problem of evil is African traditional understandings of evil. In the African worldview, evil is whatever destroys community. They contend that African theology cannot ignore the context of spiritual battle, evil spirits, demons, and the destructive powers of such forces on the African person. In Africa evil spirits are greatly feared. It is the fear of the spirit world that makes many Christians turn back to African Traditional systems especially in times of death or serious calamities such as famine and war. It is this dual allegiance that must be addressed if Christianity is to be authentic in Africa.

However, in light of all of these realities, the main focus for Circle theologians tends to be an emphasis on structural evil. Sinful structures in the world are those that perpetuate evil. These structures must be dealt with in order for *shalom* to prevail. In order to deal with the problem of evil, Oduyoye argues, African women must rise beyond coping with violence or resisting violence and transform the relationship that breeds violence.³⁰ She writes, "To have an impact, Christian efforts must become more comprehensive and deal seriously with political, economic and cultural realities."³¹

One specific kind of evil that must be addressed is the dehumanization of women. Circle theologians are very passionate when dealing with systems that dehumanize women. They have organized academic and non-academic conferences to discuss African views on women, and what can be done to correct wrong perceptions. In academic circles, they critique academic

²⁸ Mercy A. Oduyoye, "The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology," in Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, Accra, Ghana*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 110–111.

²⁹ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 42.

³⁰ In Mananzan et al., *Women Resisting Violence*, 169.

³¹ Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 44.

discourses on women, especially those by African men.³² They also organize practical meetings geared towards addressing violence against women. Most of those meetings have been held at the *Talitha Qumi* Center for Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity College in Accra. Mercy Teresia Hinga reports that the 2001 meeting at the Center provided a platform for serious debates on how to be able to proactively tackle the root causes of violence. She writes,

The women are challenged from their specific local contexts to devise practical ways of dealing with the injustices they so articulately denounce in their papers and presentations. The challenge to act is also born out of their prior self-naming not merely as objects and victims of injustice but also as moral agents capable of moral action for social transformation.³³

Bernadette Mbuy Beya reports on the efforts of an organization called Women of Katanga in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) which organized a march in 2004 to protest against sexual violence in Congo. Mbuy Beya notes that these protests showed that women cannot sit and watch the world being ravaged by injustice, “we must also question and denounce all practices contradictory to the gospel and testify to our fidelity to Jesus Christ.”³⁴ On the same note, Oduyoye asserts that African women must speak for themselves because they understand what they are going through. She writes, “African men carry none of the life-giving burdens that African women carry. Women with babies on their backs and yams, firewood, and water on their heads [are] the common image of African women in real life as in art.”³⁵

The above efforts by Circle theologians show that their interest in anthropology and the entire theological enterprise goes beyond academic theology, that is reading, reflecting and writing, to a practical theology that addresses real life issues of women and others who are oppressed in Africa. Oduyoye asserts, “African women’s theological reflections intertwine theology, ethics and spirituality.”³⁶ Kanyoro adds, “for us in Africa, it does not matter how much we write our theology in books, the big test before us is whether we can bring change to our societies. This is the tall order and we agonise about it.”³⁷

³² An example is Oduyoye’s critique of Mbiti’s view of marriage, “A Critique of John Mbiti’s View of Love and Marriage in Africa,” in Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang, eds., *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), 341–365.

³³ Teresia M. Hinga, “African Feminist Theologies, the Global Village, and the Imperative of Solidarity Across Borders: The Case of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 83.

³⁴ Sr. M. Bernadette Mbuy Beya, “Stand Up and Walk, Daughter of My People” in Phiri and Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 216.

³⁵ Oduyoye, “Feminist Theology from an African Perspective”, 174.

³⁶ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 16.

³⁷ Kanyoro, “Quest for Justice,” 82.

3. Theology of Scripture

Circle theologians are driven by a view of scripture that is highly influenced by feminist critical hermeneutics that posit that the Bible was written from a very patriarchal culture that might have influenced the position of the writers.³⁸ Circle theologians argue that Scripture has often been interpreted from a one-sided perspective where women's voices have been muted. They propose that to address injustice against women, Christians must "examine anew the meaning of the Bible."³⁹ To examine afresh the meaning of the Bible entails going back to God's original plan, which was genderless. To achieve this agenda, they employ various methodologies in reading the biblical text.

A volume of essays edited by Musa Dube, a South African feminist theologian, features various approaches to reading the Bible by African women theologians. The methods include: storytelling, womanhood/bosadi and womanist reading, reading from and with grassroots communities, and postcolonial feminist reading. I shall briefly explain each of these.

A storytelling approach uses the tools of African storytelling to read the Bible. Denise Ackermann asserts, "telling stories is intrinsic to claiming our identity and, in the process, finding impulses for hope."⁴⁰ Circle theologians utilize story as a method of doing theology. Storytelling is also therapeutic. The womanist/bosadi (womanhood) approach attempts to read the Bible from feminist liberationist methodologies that critique perceived oppressive elements in the Bible and within African culture, while also highlighting aspects that are empowering in both. This view is advanced by Madipoane Masenya, a South African theologian.⁴¹ Reading from and with grassroots communities encourages learning from non-academic readers. Dube says, "There is the need to search for native voices of interpretation."⁴² Circle theologians show that theology is to be done for the sake of the church and the community, not necessarily for the academy. They show ways of reading the Bible with people in rural villages, and emphasize that popular reading and academic reading should not be divorced. This is an important reminder to theologians to go beyond ivory-tower scholarship. Theology has to be relevant and meaningful.

³⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 191.

³⁹ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 136.

⁴⁰ Denise M. Ackermann, "From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance: Stigma, HIV/AIDS and a Feminist Theology of Praxis," in Phiri and Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 231.

⁴¹ For more on Bosadi view see, Madipoane Masenya, "Reading the Bible the Bosadi (Womanhood) Way," *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa 4*, no. 2 (July 1997): 15–16.

⁴² Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 8.

Dube made Postcolonial hermeneutics in Africa prominent. She intertwines postcolonial and feminist theories with biblical exegesis to attack any use of the Bible that justifies any form of colonialism or neocolonialism. She defines postcolonial readings of Scripture as “reading the Bible in such a way that it does not continue to endorse the colonizing of any nation or people.”⁴³ Elsewhere Dube argues that the Bible is a culturally bound book that was used to support imperialism and patriarchy in Africa. She argues that Western imperialists used the Bible to rob Africans of their land, dignity and power.⁴⁴ The colonizer suppressed people’s ideas by imposing their own.

The victims of imperialism become the colonized, that is, those whose lands, minds, cultures, economies and political institutions have been taken possession of and rearranged according to the interests and values of the imperializing powers. Imperializing ... actively suppresses diversity and promotes a few universal standards for the benefit of those in power.⁴⁵

For Dube, a postcolonial perspective does not advocate wallowing in past injustices but looks for a better, liberated future.⁴⁶ “A post-colonial biblical reading is of necessity a multicultural reflection on the passage, and an attempt to see how it can inform our wish to reconstruct peace and development.”⁴⁷ She adds that a postcolonial reading of Scripture attempts to “analyze the major mistakes of the past, and to build bridges for future dialogue.”⁴⁸

In summary, postcolonial hermeneutics looks back at how the Bible was presented to the people and attempts to unclothe the text from any justification of imperialism whether from the past or current readings. It encourages indigenous reading of the Bible because it is aware that the colonizer’s perspective cannot address the deep needs of the colonized. A postcolonial perspective applies not only to the colonizer but also to the colonized.⁴⁹

⁴³ Musa Dube, “Rereading the Bible,” in Emmanuel Katongole, ed., *African Theology Today*, (Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2002), 61.

⁴⁴ Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 15–17.

⁴⁵ Musa Dube, “Reading for Decolonization (John 4.1-42),” in Musa Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley, eds., *John and Postcolonialism: Travel, Space, and Power*, (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 297–98.

⁴⁶ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 198.

⁴⁷ Musa Dube, “Woman, What Have I to do With You?” in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Kenneth A. Ross, and James L. Cox, eds., *The Role of Christianity in Development, Peace and Reconstruction* (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1996), 249.

⁴⁸ Musa Dube, “Woman, What Have I to do with You?”, 249.

⁴⁹ For more on Postcolonial hermeneutics, see, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice of Post-Colonial Literatures*, (London: Routledge, 2002); R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998). See also, Gene L. Green, “The Challenge of Global Hermeneutics,” in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the*

Another perspective prominent in African women's biblical hermeneutics is the call for cultural hermeneutics as a part of listening to native voices of interpretation. Circle theologian Musimbi Kanyoro from Kenya has been articulate in advocating for cultural hermeneutics. She asserts: "Culture is a double-edged sword. In some instances, culture is like the creed for the community identity. In other instances, culture is the main justification for difference, oppression and injustice – especially for those whom culture defines as 'the other', 'the outsider.'"⁵⁰ She has also advocated for what she calls "engendering cultural hermeneutics",⁵¹ which signifies pursuing theology from a feminist perspective. Other Circle theologians like Oduyoye who come from matrilineal societies, see African culture being more respectful to women than "domination-riddled Christianity" to quote her.⁵² Oduyoye is more open to keeping certain African beliefs as compared to some other Circle theologians who prefer cultural hermeneutics to be able to "analyse it [culture] and put it to the test in order to know what to discard and what to keep."⁵³ However, in *Daughters of Anowa*, Oduyoye, like Kanyoro, says that African culture is a two-edged sword that provides deep cultural and religious roots for community life, while it also binds women.⁵⁴ In general, women theologians critically evaluate African culture in their quest for social transformation.

In conclusion, the Bible plays a crucial role in shaping the Circle's theology of social transformation. Indeed, Mbiti is correct, "The Bible is very much an African book, in which African Christians and theologians see themselves and their people reflected and in which they find a personal place of dignity and acceptance before God."⁵⁵

4. Christology

A good survey of what African women in general and African women Christian theologians in specific think about Jesus Christ is found in Oduyoye's

Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 50–64. See also Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000).

⁵⁰ Musimbi Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics, An African Perspective*, (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 13. For another critique of culture in relation to women issues by Kanyoro see, "Silenced by Culture, Sustained by Faith," "When Women Rise the Earth Trembles," and "When the Wretched of the Earth Speak!" in Margaret S. Larom, ed., *Claiming the Promise: African Churches Speak*, (New York: Friendship Press, 1994), 1–4; 63–67; 79–84, respectively.

⁵¹ Kanyoro, "Engendered Communal Theology, in Pui-lan, *Hope Abundant*, 27.

⁵² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Christianity and African Culture", *International Review of Mission* 84, no. 332–333, (January 1, 1995): 87.

⁵³ Kanyoro, "Quest for Justice," 78.

⁵⁴ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 15.

⁵⁵ John Mbiti, "African Theology," in S. Maimela, A. Konig, eds., *Initiation into Theology: The Rich Variety of Theology and Hermeneutics*, (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998), 142.

“Jesus Christ” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*.⁵⁶ Another useful essay in Christology is “The Christ for African Women”, by Oduyoye and Amoah.⁵⁷ Oduyoye asserts that African Christologies in general focus on “the Christ of history who defined his mission as a mission of liberation.”⁵⁸ Specifically, African women theologians assert a Christology that focuses on Jesus’ sensitivity to the misery and oppression of the weak. Just like the other themes already handled, their theology of Christ is practically oriented. They identify with events of Christ’s life that relate to their day to day experiences as women. One common narrative is Mary’s visit to Elizabeth (Lk. 1:39-56). This is significant for African women because childbearing is a crucial issue in forming their identity and acceptance in the community.⁵⁹

Two major Christological issues shape Circle Christology, that is, Christ’s suffering and his victory. African women insist, “it is vicarious suffering, freely undertaken, which is salvific, and not involuntary victimization.”⁶⁰ Christ willingly suffered for humanity so that nobody should be victimized anymore. The second issue is that of Christ’s victory. Christ conquered evil by willingly dying on the cross. For African women, Christ did not come merely to suffer but to conquer death, and through his death bring wholeness and life. The resurrection of Christ is a motivation to believe that life is possible in situations of oppression and injustice. There is hope in life because Jesus Christ was and is still victorious. It is this hope that drives social transformation. Oduyoye concurs that Jesus as source of wholeness was,

empowered and sent by God to show humanity what it means to live fully the image in which we are made. Living fully has come to mean resisting oppression, transforming potential death into life and believing that the resurrection happens every time we defeat death and begin a new life.⁶¹

It is this desire for life in an oppressive world that drives African women to seek empowerment and participate in justice-making. They strongly believe that Christianity has resources for the transformation of dehumanizing culture. As we have seen above, this is based on the Christ event. It is through Christ that life is possible.

Thérèse Souga (from a Catholic perspective) and Louise Tappa (from a Protestant perspective) center their Christology on Jesus’ encouragement of

⁵⁶ Oduyoye, “Jesus Christ” in Susan F. Parsons, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151–170.

⁵⁷ Oduyoye and Amoah, “The Christ for African Women” in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 35–46.

⁵⁸ Oduyoye, “Jesus Christ” in Parsons, *Cambridge Companion*, 162.

⁵⁹ See Oduyoye’s personal experience, “A Coming Home to Myself: A Childless Woman in the West African Space,” in Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones, eds., *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 105–123. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, ch. 4.

⁶⁰ Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, xiv.

⁶¹ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 64.

women's self-affirmation. Tappa asserts that if "Christology is to work out the full meaning of the reality of the Christ event for humankind", then the procedure for articulating it should be that "of contemplating and thinking of Christ in relation to our situation and our praxis."⁶² Souga follows this method and maintains, "Jesus bears a message of liberation for every human being and especially for those social categories that are most disadvantaged."⁶³

Oduyoye summarizes African women's Christology in four major models: eschatology, anthropology, liberation, and cosmology. In the *eschatological* model, the focus is on Christ's resurrection, that is, African women focus on life as possible because of Christ's overcoming of death. The *anthropological* model focuses on neighborliness, "and a life that puts others first and gives them life." In the *liberationist* model, the focus is on liberating humanity from dehumanizing structures, and in the *cosmological* model, the theologians identify with Christ who restores the cosmos.⁶⁴

For African women in general and African women theologians specifically, Jesus is sensitive to their misery and oppression and seeks their empowerment and liberation. All the oppressed of the world can find comfort in Christ. Christ is not merely concerned with human suffering, he is also concerned with the overall well-being of the entire cosmos.

Because of what Christ willingly accomplished on the cross for the world, women find a voice to speak against all manner of injustice. Oduyoye writes, "As Christian women we do have a precedent. Jesus once asked his followers, 'Who do you say that I am?' Asked such a question, we have no need to echo anyone else's findings about God: we can raise our own voice."⁶⁵ Also she notes, "African women today can announce in their own words the one in whom they have believed."⁶⁶ African women theologians emphasize that in Christ Jesus women find their liberation and a voice to speak up.

For African women, Christ is the hope of Africa's poor. In Christ, the oppressed find liberation from their oppressors. In Christ also, the oppressors are strongly warned to stop oppressing others. This is evident in *Jesus of the Deep Forest* by Efua Kuma who describes Jesus as a powerful protector from all manner of dangers that human beings face in life. Jesus is also a destroyer of violent forces whether human or nonhuman.⁶⁷ Louise Tappa speaks for all

⁶² Louise Tappa, "The Christ Event: Protestant Perspective" in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 30.

⁶³ Thérèse Souga, "The Christ Event: Catholic Perspective" in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 23.

⁶⁴ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 61–62.

⁶⁵ Oduyoye, "Acting as Women" in Katongole, *African Theology Today*, 173.

⁶⁶ Oduyoye, "Jesus Christ" in Parsons, *Cambridge Companion*, 151.

⁶⁷ Efua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest* (Accra: Asempa Press, 1980).

African women when she writes, “Christ is the source of our faith, Christ is the norm of our faith, [and] Christ is the content of our faith.”⁶⁸

5. Ecclesiology

In ecclesiology, Circle theologians pay attention to the theme of the household of God. They build on the experience of African women as home-makers to reflect on church as community under God – God’s house where God is fully in charge.⁶⁹ They argue that the church in Africa has ignored the voices of women even though women are the majority in the church. Women also serve as church secretaries, deaconesses, and in other roles the church assigns to them. Women are generally expected to obey and not question whatever their male counterparts tell them. Circle theologians argue that this does not model what it means for the church to be the household of God.⁷⁰ The church models God’s family when it cares for and shares with others especially the marginalized in society.⁷¹

Circle theologians also build on the African communal ethic rooted in the African maxim “I am, because we are” to encourage communal ecclesiology. Naomi Tutu, Desmond Tutu’s daughter, summarizes her father’s concept of the community, “So in Xhosa we say *U muntu ngu muntu ngabantu*, meaning a person is a person through other people.”⁷² In this ethic, sin is understood not only in personal terms but also in a collective manner. Sin is not only what injures an individual, it also is what injures or destroys the community. Dube explains community and its place in reforming societies fighting HIV/AIDS:

The concept of community ... ought to and should become the cornerstone of propounding an African indigenous theology of justice and liberation by constantly revisiting “what it means to be community and to live in community,” “what violates community,” and “how we can live in community in our new and hybrid twenty-first century contexts... for it is only then that we can say “I am because we are, and we are because I am.”⁷³

For African women, ecclesiology entails lived experience. Oduyoye notes that African women theologians move from the images of the Church in the New Testament, to African women’s experience in churches today.⁷⁴ What this means is that their primary concern is not New Testament or patristic

⁶⁸ Louise Tappa, “The Christ Event: A Protestant Perspective” in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 34.

⁶⁹ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 78. See also Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Transforming Power: Women in the Household of God*, (Accra: Sam Woode, 1997).

⁷⁰ Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 124–125.

⁷¹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The African Family as a Symbol of Ecumenism,” *Ecumenical Review* 43, no. 4 (October 1, 1991): 456.

⁷² Naomi Tutu, *The Words of Desmond Tutu*, (London: Spire, 1989), 14.

⁷³ Musa Dube, “*Adinkra!* Four Hearts Joined Together: On Becoming Healing-Teachers of African Indigenous Religion/s in HIV & AIDS Prevention,” in Phiri and Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 141.

⁷⁴ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, 80.

ecclesiology but practical ecclesiology that speaks to their own experiences as African women. In other words, the African woman cannot do ecclesiology outside their daily experiences of suffering and pain evidenced in polygamy, early marriages, female genital mutilation, wife inheritance, singlehood, childlessness, widowhood, and property rights. Circle theologians therefore pursue justice for women as a paradigm for ecclesiology.⁷⁵

The notion of Church as a place of justice has shaped African women's understanding of ecumenism. Their theology of ecumenism flows from a life of Christian commitment to furthering the dignity of all people in Christ. Oduyoye writes, "each denomination of the Christ family is a unit expected by Christ the source to be a visible manifestation of all that is Christ-like, so that when individual members of various denominations meet in a 'strange land', they may recognize the symbol of the presence of Christ, gather around it and celebrate their oneness, being born by one baptism and constituted into a people by one cross."⁷⁶ Oduyoye notes that the intention of ecumenism is not uniformity but unity in diversity, "the multiple expressions of our common faith and common mission."⁷⁷ Using the image of the African family to describe the church, Oduyoye writes, "Africans see it [the church] as an *Abusua* [the Akan ethnic community's association of households] of Christ, the coming together of 'relatives' of Christ to be a new community that does the will of God."⁷⁸ She adds, "The cohesion of the African family and the quality of relationships expected has become the basis of the whole society. It has symbolized for me the meaning of being in one KIN-DOM."⁷⁹

Circle ecclesiology also insists that men and women together must build a better world. Dorothy Ramodibe argues that the life of the church and its influence in society depends on how the Church treats women.⁸⁰ Dube calls all Christians, whether from the "first world" or "third-world", to engage in social transformation. The world is a global village, she reminds her readers.

To reread the Bible for social justice is, therefore, a quest for coexistence that is not built on exploiting the other. It is a search for ways of building a just society and world. This must involve all of us. If we realize that we are not just reading the text, but rereading it in the light of social justice, then no audience

⁷⁵ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 32.

⁷⁶ Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol of Ecumenism," 470.

⁷⁷ Oduyoye, "Unity and Mission: The Emerging Ecumenical Vision" in Paul Wesley Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, eds., *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 331.

⁷⁸ Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol of Ecumenism", 471.

⁷⁹ Oduyoye, "The African Family as a Symbol of Ecumenism", 446.

⁸⁰ Dorothy Ramodibe, *Women and Men Building Together the Church in Africa* in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 16.

should say, "That's your social location and your experience. It's not my experience," for as long as we are the world we are interconnected.⁸¹

Women's ordination is on top of the agenda for some Circle theologians. They want women to be included in the ordained ministries of the church in Africa. They argue that there is no theological basis to lock out women from ordination.⁸² They see ordained women as pillars of some of the Circle agenda, "We are hoping that they [ordained women pastors] will bring in some of the feminine possibilities as they serve as pastors in the congregations, as they minister in their sermons, and as they do church administration."⁸³

Another crucial issue is theological or seminary training. Circle theologians call for a re-evaluation of theological training to ensure that relevant issues are covered. They argue that the reason that many pastors in Africa make no difference in their communities is because the seminary or theological college does not train them in social transformation. In addition to the neglect of social transformation, is the neglect of African women's theology in the curriculum.⁸⁴ Circle theologians ask pertinent questions related to pastoral training. For example, Kanyoro asks, "How can the curriculum that is taught in the seminary really be made relevant to the reality that people will have to face when they go to serve in the ordained ministry?"⁸⁵

Circle theologians call the church to "being" before "doing." For Kanyoro true justice stems from character transformation of God's people. She explains "to be just is to be straight, right, attentive, acting according to the inner being and having integrity of character ... A just society depends on just people."⁸⁶

Circle theologians intertwine ecclesiology with missiology. What is the mission of the church? African women theologians argue that the church is mission. Being true representatives of Christ entails living as Christ intended. The church is called to tell the truth regardless of how difficult that might be. For Kanyoro the Church in Africa needs to re-read the Scriptures "with new eyes and see that God is calling us and empowering us to do the more difficult

⁸¹ Musa Dube, "Rereading the Bible," in Katongole, *African Theology Today*, 66.

⁸² Kanyoro, "Quest for Justice", 82–83.

⁸³ Kanyoro, "Quest for Justice", 82–83.

⁸⁴ Phiri identifies four challenges in theological education in Africa in training women: "1) redefining the identity of African women theologians; 2) promoting more women to study theology and be on permanent staff; 3) inclusion of African women's theology in the theological curriculum; and 4) collaboration with male theologians." Isabel A. Phiri, "Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989-2008)," *International Review of Mission* 98, no. 388, (April 2009): 105–119.

⁸⁵ Kanyoro, "Quest for Justice," 84.

⁸⁶ Musimbi Kanyoro, "A Life of Endless Struggle or Stubborn Hope?: An African Feminine Perspective on the Jubilee," *Ecumenical Review* 49, no. 4 (Oct 1, 1997): 409.

tasks of our mission - that is, to speak out for the truth."⁸⁷ The church must speak the truth about the oppression of women within and outside the church. The Circle argues that the Church cannot ignore the voices of African women because "women are the prophets of Africa" and "missionaries to our ailing society."⁸⁸ For Oduyoye, "The Church therefore misses out on its vocation when it refuses to listen to and include women in its task of being in God's mission."⁸⁹ In summary, Circle theologians advance a practical ecclesiology rooted in the need for social transformation.

6. Eschatology

African women's eschatology is grounded in the reality of suffering and the plight of all the African people, especially women and children. Their eschatology is built within the context of Africa, possibly the world's most impoverished and broken continent. Njoroge notes that even though African women would love to do theology in contexts of joy, the reality is that their suffering leads to a theology of lamentation.⁹⁰ In spite of this reality, Circle eschatology is also a theology of hope. Circle theologians advance a theology of hope rooted in life from the biblical teaching on the resurrection of the body. It is through the victorious Christ that hope is possible. Oduyoye explains that women theologians put their hope in God who makes things better.

The dignity of humanity that women believe in, and which they believe is the will of God, has become a ground of hope in women's theology. Hope makes women utilize their anger against unnecessary suffering. They turn anger into compassion as a route to transformation.⁹¹

As with the other aspects of their theology, the Circle theologians' eschatology is practical. Their eschatology is actively involved in realizing God's will in Africa, as they see it. They envision a future where oppression will be no more. They believe that one day, "life will defeat death, and that injustice will flee the presence of justice."⁹² They envision "a hope for the redemption of the humanity of those who do the oppressing and the marginalizing."⁹³ Their eschatological hope is rooted in action, so they believe that Christians have a mandate to make things better in this world. For Nlenanya Onwu, humanity's quest for righteousness is not necessarily a

⁸⁷ Musimbi Kanyoro, "Thinking Mission in Africa", *International Review of Mission* 87, no. 345, (April 1, 1998): 226.

⁸⁸ Kanyoro, "Thinking Mission in Africa", 228.

⁸⁹ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 87.

⁹⁰ N.J. Njoroge, "A New Way of Facilitating Leadership: Lessons from African Women Theologians" in *Missiology: An International Review* 33, no. 1 (2005), 40.

⁹¹ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 114. See also Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Christology and an African Woman's Experience" in J.N.K. Mugambi and Lautenti Magesa, eds., *Jesus in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Acton, 1998), 123–135.

⁹² Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 119.

⁹³ Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, 116.

movement towards the *eschaton*, but a present experience in fullness of life and total well-being.⁹⁴ Following her husband's death through cancer, Fulata Moyo wrote that eschatological hope is a refusal to accept the status quo of suffering, loneliness, and hopelessness because eschatology is not only *parousia* (future events), but also "consists rather in our calling and mission to transform for the world."⁹⁵ For Circle theologians, eschatology is not just future oriented but involves the here and now. They work for better structures in the society for justice, peace, and wholeness to make the world a better place.

Conclusion

This article explored six themes that shape African women's theology of social transformation. It proposed that the Circle's theology of social transformation is situated around six major themes: Theology of God, Christian Anthropology, Theology of Scripture, Theology of Christ, Theology of the Church, and Eschatology. Not all African women theologians speak in one voice, but they share one conviction: theology should be praxis oriented.⁹⁶ They seek to connect orthodoxy with orthopraxis. It is even possible to add "orthopathos" to their theology, that is, their theology stems from "right pathos, or right compassion." For them, theology and social transformation are interconnected; theology is transformational. Even though Circle theologians are particularly interested in elevating the place of women in society, they are also interested in all other dehumanizing structures in societies. Circle theologians remind us to think seriously about the social transformation of the world. They advocate for justice, reconciliation, and transformation of our world by way of doing theology. They particularly speak to the Evangelical church in Africa to consider social engagement part of their mission agenda. Equating socio-political endeavors with mere humanistic endeavors has made many evangelicals shy away from social-political involvement. The Church should take women's perspectives with the seriousness they deserve, for as Desmond Tutu said, "There can be no true liberation that ignores the question raised by the movement for the liberation of women."⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Nlenanya Onwu, "Biblical Perspectives for Peace, Development and Reconstruction: Its Socio-Religious Implications for the Churches in Africa," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Kenneth A. Ross, and James L. Cox, eds. *The Role of Christianity in Development, Peace and Reconstruction*, (Nairobi: All Africa Conference of Churches, 1996), 40.

⁹⁵ Fulata Lusungu Moyo, "Navigating Experiences of Healing: A Narrative Theology of Eschatological Hope as Healing," in Phiri and Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 252.

⁹⁶ Ogbu U. Kalu, "Daughters of Ethiopia: Constructing A Feminist Discourse in Ebony Strokes," in Phiri and Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 263. Kalu adds, "some women choose to be *rejectionist* by rejecting the Bible as canon; others are *radical reformers* who mine the radical elements within the gospel for empowerment; and still others have deployed Biblicism as the mooring for *loyalist* postures." Phiri and Nadar, *African Women, Religion, and Health*, 265–266.

⁹⁷ Tutu, *The Words of Desmond Tutu*, 59.

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