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An African
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In May 2020, Africa lost one of its finest theologians, the Tanzanian Charles Nyamiti (1931-2020). Together with prominent writers like Vincent Mulago, John S. Mbiti, Appiah-Kubi, Kwesi Dickson, Bénéze Bujo, Eboussi Bulaga, Ela J. M., Emmanuel Bolaji Idowu, he belongs to a generation of creative African theologians who pioneered Christian theological reflection from an *African perspective*. Prior to the independence of many African countries in the 1960s and 70s, the views of Africans and their religiosity were mostly articulated by European missionaries, historians, and anthropologists. While they were ground-breaking in many ways, they sometimes were oblivious to certain cultural nuances and sensibilities in which many Africans were aware.

Charles Nyamiti's interest in African Christian Theology began early in Kipalapala near Tabora in Tanzania during his philosophical and theological training in the seminary (1954-1962). After his ordination as a priest of the Archdiocese of Tabora in 1962, he continued his theological studies in the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium where he submitted his licentiate thesis in 1966 and doctorate dissertation in 1969. Nyamiti also studied music at the Conservatorium of Leuven and subsequently Vienna, where he started to study ethnology (*Völkerkunde*) at the university and musical composition in the Vienna High School of Music. He was awarded a doctorate in Vienna in 1975. Nyamiti returned to Africa teaching first in Kipalapala seminary and then the Catholic Institute of Eastern Africa (CHIEA) in Nairobi, Kenya. This institute was given a charter in 1992 and became the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). Nyamiti focuses on the critical understanding of *African* Christian Theology understood in the strict narrow sense as the systematic and scientific presentation

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or elaboration of the Christian faith according to the worldview of the people in sub-Saharan Africa. This clarification is necessary because it can be argued that African theology existed since the beginning of Christianity in the continent although to a great extent, in a latent form, mainly orally, in an unsystematic fashion. However, the systematic and scientific presentation and elaboration of the Christian faith according to the needs and worldviews of the people of sub-Saharan Africa is only in its infancy when compared to theological expositions in the apostolic, patristic, medieval, reformation and post-reformation epochs.

Nyamiti's most important contribution is in Christology. This is hardly surprising since Christology is the subject which has been most developed in today's African theology. Already, there is a variety of African Christologies. Prominent among them are African Christologies of inculturation and African Christologies of liberation. Nyamiti's theological approach falls into the category of African Christologies of *inculturation*. His most significant contribution is the book *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*.¹ Nyamiti based his Christological reflections on the African understanding of "ancestor," although his conclusions are different from another African author Bénézet Bujo.² The starting point for Nyamiti are the beliefs and practices found in many (though not in all) African traditional societies. According to these beliefs, ancestral relationship (between the living and the dead, and sometimes between the Supreme Being and humanity on earth) comprises the following elements: Kingship (consanguineous or non-consanguineous) between the dead and his/her living kin; In many cases the ancestor has also to be the source of life for his/her earthly relatives; Superhuman status (usually acquired through death) comprising nearness to God, sacred powers and other superhuman qualities; Mediation (not indispensable) between God and the earthly kin; Exemplarity of behaviour in community; Right or title to frequent sacred

1 Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: 1984). See "Ancestral Kinship in the Trinity: An African Theology of the Trinity," in *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures* (Effective Inculturation and Ethnic Identity), Vol. IX, Rome 1987, 29-48; "The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter between the living and the dead", in *African Christian Studies*, CHIEA, Nairobi, August 1985, 28-48; "Uganda Martyrs: Ancestors of Mankind", in *African Christian Studies*, CHIEA, July 1986, 41-66; "African Tradition and the Christian God", in *Spearhead*, no. 49 (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1977).

2 Bénézet Bujo, "Pour une éthique africano-christocentrique", in *Bulletin de la théologie africaine*, vol. 3, no. 5 (January - June), Kinshasa, 1981, 41-52; "A Christo-centric ethic for black Africa", in *Theology Digest*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1982, 143-6; *Afrikanische Theologie: in ihrem gesellschaftlichen Kontext* (Theologie Interkulturell, vol. 1), Dusseldorf, 1986, 79-137.

communication with the living kin through prayers and ritual offerings (obligations). This understanding of ancestral relationship leads Nyamiti to examine first the inner life of God (Trinity) and finds out that there is *analogically* speaking – an ancestral kinship among the divine persons.

Nyamiti is a creative contributor to African Christian Theology and goes beyond mere prolegomena. His method is a significant progress when compared to the contents of the symposium “*Les prêtres noirs s’interrogent*,”³ published in 1956, and those of the book “*Chemins de la christologie africaine*,”⁴ written thirty years after. In the first case, French speaking African theologians are speaking about the possibility of and need for African theology; in the latter case, they are building it. For the first time in the history of sub-Saharan Africa, African categories are systematically employed to express and expound the mystery of our Saviour: think of expressions as “Christ the integral healer, chief, elder-brother, master of initiation, ancestor, black messiah (liberator), plenitude of human maturity”, etc.⁵ It should be emphasized that in order to perceive better the *originality* of these titles as applied to Christ one should take them in their African sense, and should see them from the perspective of the African social and cultural background from which they are taken. Together with other African theologians, Nyamiti brought into focus African points of departure from which the various writers envisage Christ’s mystery. This is what conduces them to accentuate, in their own specific ways, the different Christological teachings implicit in the Bible, for example, Christ as victor, or as ancestral mediator, the cross as a mystery which inspires discreet feasting and circumspect conviviality, and so forth.

Although there is a strong Thomistic influence in his writing, Nyamiti contributed significantly to building the *theological bridge* between Western and African categories. His goal was to bring traditional theological categories to Africans while promoting and making the world to understand African concepts.

3 Paulat Emile, “Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent”, in *Archives de Science Sociale des Religions*, Année, 3, 1957, 175.

4 François Kabesele Lumbale, Joseph Daré, René Luneau, Bénédét Bujó, *Chemins de la christologie africaine* (Paris: Desclée, 1982), 143-166.

5 Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (London: 1985); “Christian Healing and Traditional Medicine in Africa”, in *Kerygma*, 20 (1986), 51-58; Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Toward a New Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: 1968), 72; J. S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 81-98; A. T. Sanon, “Jesus, Maître d’initiation”, in F. Kabesele et al. (eds), *Chemins de la christologie africaine*, 143-166; *Enraciner l’évangile: initiations Africaines et pédagogie de la foi*, Paris, 1982. P.N. Wachegé, *Christ Our Elder: A Christological Study from the Kikuyu concept of elder* (mimeographed thesis), CHIEA, Nairobi, 1986.

Nyamiti's legacy is his contribution at developing a theological method and making African Christian theological reflection known to the world. He prepared the generation of students he taught for decades to continue to make African Christianity known clearly both within Africa and beyond.

Getting Our House in Order. The eighth resource provided by Christian faith is the emphasis on right order. We have all heard of the catchphrase “get your house in order first”. It describes the urgent need to sort ourselves out by identifying what elements in our lives we need to change or prioritise before we can help others. The phrase also points to a more literal truth of the importance of order as a prerequisite to a clear mind and a sound mental health. A simple example is tidying my room or my desk in the office. The more I put some order or shape in it, the better I feel I can focus on my work and plan my day; or putting order in my day with the help of my diary. It helps me to organise commitments but also helps me retain control of when I exercise, rest, read, call friends and pray. From this everyday experience, I know the truth that tranquillity and harmony do flow from right order.

Billy Swan, *Faith and Mental Health* (London, Catholic Truth Society) p.57.