

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN POSTCOLONIAL
THEOLOGY: FOUND BALANCE, INTERRELIGIOUS
AND INTERDENOMINATIONAL DIALOGUE,
REHABILITATION OF RELATIONS
WITH TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS,
AND REFLECTION ON SYNCRETISMS

ONDŘEJ HAVELKA

ABSTRACT

African postcolonial theology is the application of postcolonial critique to African theology, with the main aim of critiquing hegemonic ideological constructions and providing legitimacy to alternative theological views. African theologians developing postcolonial theology argue that the previously dominant Western form of Christianity indiscriminately imposed on Africa in the second phase of Africa's Christianization is in fact determined, shaped and defined by European colonialism, which implies and reinforces notions such as Eurocentrism, colonial exploitation and the superiority of European values and culture over African values. Therefore, there is a need to critically examine the history of the African mission and develop alternative interpretations to colonial-tinged narratives. The aim of this article is to examine the current state of postcolonial theology, which has been shaped by a long and arduous journey to find its own balance after a painful period of colonial dictatorship, violence, and complete cultural and religious intolerance, but also a difficult period of postcolonial epistemic violence, subalternity, and hybridity. We pay special attention to the relationship to interreligious dialogue, traditional African religions, and the syncretisms of Christianity and traditional religions. The outlined issues are elaborated through the method of own long-term field research in the field of African Christianity and its relationship with traditional African religions.

Keywords

Postcolonial theology; African theology; Black theology; African Christianity; Interreligious dialogue

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African postcolonial theology is the application of postcolonial critique to (ecumenically conceived) African theology, with the

main aim of critiquing hegemonic ideological constructions and providing legitimacy to alternative theological views.¹ African theologians developing postcolonial theology argue that the previously dominant Western form of Christianity rather indiscriminately imposed on Africa in the second phase of Africa's Christianization² is in fact determined, shaped and defined by European colonialism, implying and reinforcing notions such as Eurocentrism, colonial exploitation and the superiority of European values and culture over African values.³ Therefore, there is a need to critically examine the history of the African mission and develop alternative interpretations to colonial-tinged narratives. This is particularly served by re-examining the question of how indigenous African cultures with their traditional religions can contribute to contemporary emancipated postcolonial theology and biblical studies.⁴ Influential postcolonial theories emerged in the late 1970s, while a distinctive postcolonial theology emerged in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s.⁵

The aim of this article is to examine the current state and self-understanding of postcolonial theology, which has been shaped by a long and painful journey to find its own balance and identity after a painful period of colonial dictatorship, violence, and cultural and religious intolerance, but later also a difficult period of postcolonial epistemic violence, subalternity, hybridity, and other phenomena. We pay special attention to the relationship to interreligious dialogue, which is a key topic across the entire continent in today's Africa, the relationship to traditional African religions, which have experienced a significant new wave of interest among many Africans in the last ten years,⁶ and especially the relationship to the syncretisms of Christianity and

¹ Tinyiko Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology in Africa,' in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (London, New York: Routledge, 2022), 335–343.

² Ondřej Havelka, 'Křesťanství v Africe: tři fáze christianizace a specifika africké teologie a spirituality,' *Theologická revue* 92, no. 3 (2022): 291–309. doi: 10.14712/12117617.92.5.5.

³ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 7–32.

⁴ Rachel A. Rakotonirina, 'Power and Knowledge in Mission Historiography: A Postcolonial Approach to Martyrological Texts on Madagascar 1837–1937,' *Studies in World Christianity* 5, no. 2 (1999): 156–176. doi: 10.3366/swc.1999.5.2.156.

⁵ Simon Kwan, *Postcolonial Resistance and Asian Theology* (London: Routledge, 2013), 9–10.

⁶ Massimo Introvigne and Rosita Šorytė, *The Revelation Spiritual Home. The Revival of African Indigenous Spirituality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 3–6.

traditional religions, which is an important but, in our opinion, hitherto under-reflected topic. We consider the inclusion of the relationship between contemporary postcolonial theology and syncretisms to be the original scientific contribution of this study. We then propose extending the topic to include attitudes toward multiple religious identities (or multiple religious belonging)⁷ as another possible way of deepening the research. It is precisely the attitude towards widespread syncretism and multiple religious identities that gives postcolonial theology a clear advantage over the mere reactionary paradigm of decolonization and can thus offer an original contribution to contemporary world theology.

The chosen topic is addressed using the method of long-term field research in the area of African Christianity and its relationship to traditional African religions,⁸ which provided the impetus for the study of African theology as written by African thinkers. The author spent a total of three years in Africa between 2001 and 2025 and visited 33 African countries across the continent.⁹ Using the methods of participant observation¹⁰ and structured interviews¹¹ with believers and representatives of the religions in question, he studied in particular the syncretism of Christianity and traditional African religions.¹² This work not only provided new information about unique syncretisms and their religious experience by believers,¹³ but also insight into the self-understanding

⁷ Multiple religious identity refers to a situation in which an individual adheres to more than one religion. This may involve two religions that the individual does not mix, but toward both of which he holds the same respect, attending their services or rituals without syncretizing them. In an individual's life, this may involve two or even more religions. Sub-Saharan Africa is typical in this regard, where a large number of believers practice Christianity or Islam as well as one of the traditional religions of their ancestors. However, multiple religious identities are considered problematic or even doctrinally unacceptable by many Christians outside of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Europe and the United States.

⁸ Ondřej Havelka, 'The Syncretism of the Gabonese Bwiti Religion and Catholic Christianity from a Theological and Theological-Ethical Perspective,' *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica* 12, no. 1 (2022): 145–159. doi: 10.14712/23365398.2022.22.

⁹ Ondřej Havelka, 'Odinala Traditional Religion as Part of Igbo Catholic Christian Identity,' *Communio Viatorum* 66, no. 2 (2024): 139–155. doi: 10.14712/30296374.2024.12.

¹⁰ Ondřej Havelka, *Africká náboženství: religionistika, teologie, afrikanistika* (Praha: Dingir, 2024), 17–22.

¹¹ Ondřej Havelka, *Africké náboženské tradice: duchovní bohatství nejhudšího kontinentu* (Praha: Dingir, 2025), 18–19.

¹² Ondřej Havelka, 'The Yoruba Religion and Complex Interreligious Relations in Nigeria,' *Acta Missiologica* 17, no. 2 (2023): 43–52.

¹³ Ondřej Havelka, 'Synkretismus katolického křesťanství a západoafrického vodunu z teologickoetické perspektivy,' *Studia Theologica* 23, no. 3 (2021): 149–174. doi: 10.5507/sth.2021.033.

of contemporary postcolonial theology by a Western researcher, albeit from within Africa. Given the limitations of space, it is not possible to address the ideas of all authors who have studied this topic in depth, or even of most of them. We have therefore selected those authors who, in our view, form the cornerstones of contemporary discourse.¹⁴

1. Postcolonial critique in theological application

Postcolonial critique, or postcolonialism, refers to a set of postmodern theories that brings together literature, political science, philosophy, theology, and many other disciplines to study and critically analyse the multilayered legacy of (very negatively perceived by Africans) colonialism.¹⁵ Postcolonialism is also used as a term to refer to the historical period after the independence of former colonies, in the case of our interest in Africa. Different schools of thought understand African postcolonialism in different ways (and often quite inconsistently in evaluative ethical, political, social, or philosophical terms), but this broadest characterization of the term is sufficient for the purposes of this text, since we are specifically concerned with postcolonial theology and will therefore narrow our interest to it and only it. What we are examining here is also the birth and evolution of a theological phenomenon that is defined by an elusive period of time, since the liberation and emancipation of the various African countries that were colonized by European conquerors and usurpers occurred over a longer period of time, and African theology itself and its splinter disciplines evolved and transformed during this period.¹⁶

Postcolonial critique provides an opportunity for thinkers emerging from oppression, i.e. from African countries where the local culture and traditional religions (including syncretisms of Christianity and traditional religions) were grossly suppressed or outright banned and destroyed by European colonizers. Africans were deprived of their own identity and a new identity was imposed on them, imported from

¹⁴ Due to space limitations, this article does not address the ideas of Pentecostal theologians, who nevertheless deserve their own dedicated discussion. We will therefore leave their ideas for further exploration of the topic. African Christianity is such a broad subject that we simply must narrow our focus, even if this means overlooking other undoubtedly significant topics.

¹⁵ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7–9.

¹⁶ Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, 19–20.

the European environment, which, however, did not suit Africans.¹⁷ In many countries, Africans were explicitly or implicitly enslaved, constrained and Eurocentrically re-educated at the will of a more powerful conqueror who generally despised Africans, viewed them racially as having a mistaken culture and, if any, a decidedly evil religion. The total devastation of the human dignity of the black population during the apartheid period in South Africa can be seen as the culmination of these shameful crimes.¹⁸

In this article, in accordance with global literature, we distinguish between the following phenomena: 1. *African theology*; 2. *Black (South African) theology*; and 3. *Postcolonial theology*. African theology was born out of the substrate of African Christianity, which is extraordinarily diverse. While Western theology speaks of two major phases of the Christianization of Africa, we find it more accurate to speak of three major phases of the Christianization of Africa. The first, which we propose to call the apostolic phase of Christianization, took place in the early centuries of Christianity, first in Egypt and then further west through North Africa, but also south along the Nile through Nubia into present-day Ethiopia and probably parts of Somalia and northern Kenya. The second, which we call the paternalistic phase of Christianization, took place from the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries in sub-Saharan Africa. The third, which we call the partnership phase, can be observed in Africa today and its beginning can be loosely linked to the emergence of African theology in the 1960s.¹⁹

In response to the suffering inflicted during the period of colonization, indigenous Christian churches arose that proclaimed that God would certainly not send white missionaries beholden to the colonialists with a message as important as the gospel, and even that Jesus must have been black or he would not have been the savior of Africans.²⁰ Thus, for example, in 1921 in the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Kimbanguism was founded – a new

¹⁷ James N. Amanze, 'Dialogue Between African Traditional Religion and Christian Theology,' in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (London, New York: Routledge, 2022), 73–84.

¹⁸ Timothy Aarde, 'The Four Waves of Black Theology in South Africa and Context of Political Struggle,' in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (London, New York: Routledge, 2022), 105–116.

¹⁹ Havelka, *Africká náboženství*, 21–24.

²⁰ Ali A. Mazrui, 'Religion and Political Culture in Africa,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 4 (1985): 817–839.

Christian community of believers of the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth.²¹ There are hundreds of similar churches of varying numbers speaking out against the crimes committed by whites against Africans during colonialism.²²

Another example of a defining new African Christian church is the Benin-based Celestial Church of Christ. However, the latter defines itself against the Catholic Church in Benin for the opposite reason, because it considers Catholic Christianity in Benin to be a syncretism of Christianity and the traditional religion of the Vodun, and therefore, from that point of view, for the (perhaps implicit) collaboration of Catholics with witchcraft, which it strongly opposes.²³ The Celestial Church of Christ does not recognize Benin Catholic Christianity as true Christianity, but as a heretical syncretism that has adopted elements of the original traditional Benin religion.²⁴ Members of the Celestial Church of Christ, with whom the author conducted structured interviews in Benin, but also in Togo and Ghana, took a sharply critical stance against local Catholic Christianity because of what they saw as its departure from true Christian doctrine.²⁵

In Benin, there is indeed a syncretism of Catholic Christianity and Vodun, to which the author devoted a separate study based on field research.²⁶ For the topic of contemporary postcolonial theology, it is crucial that the Catholic Church authorities in Benin take a much more conciliatory stance towards believers who practice the local syncretism of Catholic Christianity and Vodun, as well as towards believers who have multiple religious identities, than the authorities of the Heavenly Church of Christ. This is clearly evident from the results of the author's structured questioning of Beninese informants.²⁷ Vodun plays a role in shaping the identity of the Beninese people. Catholic missionaries tried to erase this part of their identity between the 16th and 19th centuries, the communist government dictatorship attempted to do so in the 20th century, and today the Celestial Church of Christ and similarly

²¹ Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 48–49.

²² Havelka, 'Synkretismus katolického křesťanství,' 149–174.

²³ Christopher Patridge, *New Religions: A Guide: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61–65.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Havelka, *Africká náboženství*, 161–188.

²⁶ Havelka, 'Synkretismus katolického křesťanství,' 149–174.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

mindful smaller local Christian movements demand this of their followers. These attempts have been unsuccessful. The Catholic Church in Benin has undergone a significant transformation in this regard, learning from its own history in Benin and now not only tolerating but actively respecting the Vodun part of Beninese identity. This does not mean that the doctrine derived from Revelation (theistic pole) has changed in any way, but rather that the identity of the recipient of the gospel (andric pole) is respected.²⁸

The author observed a similar attitude during field research conducted among the Nigerian Catholic Church (both among informants from the ranks of superiors and ordinary believers) with regard to the traditional Igbo religion of Odinala, which is based on a different theological conception of the human person than that found in purely Catholic theology, or more precisely, Western Catholic theology. For Igbo Christians, too, Odinala is a fundamental part of their identity, which the Catholic Church there today respects and even accepts its theology of the human person as one of the legitimate African theological approaches to the mystery of man in relation to God and his neighbors.²⁹

For a complete understanding of the issue, however, we should also add that in Benin and Nigeria, even among local Christian thinkers, there are voices saying that the people there should not have accepted the religion of the colonizers at all. This view is promoted by many religious communities across Africa, which are calling for a return to the religions that existed before the arrival of the colonizers and their missionaries.³⁰ On the other hand, there are African Christian theologians who reject traditional religions and syncretism and subject them to harsh criticism.³¹ It should also be noted that some prominent African theologians, such as John S. Mbiti, considered traditional African religions to be a preparation for Africans to accept the Gospel, an important preparation, but still *only* a preparation. However, the same theologian justifies the African theological concept of the human person, which is significantly anchored in society and derived from traditional religions.³² This shows that the contemporary face of postco-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Havelka, 'Odinala,' 139–153.

³⁰ Introvigne and Šoryté, *The Revelation Spiritual Home*, 4–10.

³¹ Havelka, 'Synkretismus katolíckého kresťanství,' 149–174.

³² Havelka, *Africká náboženství*, 138–143.

lonial theology is multi-layered and multi-colored. After all, if we were to characterize the religious dimension of African life in one word, it would be *diversity*. This is also reflected in contemporary postcolonial theology. The main line of thought with regard to syncretism and traditional religions is respect, dialogue aimed at understanding the other side and mutual enrichment, but there are also different currents.

2. African and black theology

Contemporary African theology is a purely postcolonial phenomenon.⁵³ But when and from what motivations did African theology as a distinct discipline emerge? It was born in the mid-20th century as a reaction by African Christian theologians to the colonial missionary approach to Africans and their indigenous religions,⁵⁴ which Africans retroactively disliked.⁵⁵ This movement effectively marked the majority end of the second major phase of the Christianization of Africa in a paternalistic colonialist manner. Thanks to modern communication possibilities and the significant rise of education in Africa, the initiative has been taken over by the current third phase of Christianization, which we call partnership. Tinyiko Maluleke emphasizes, however, that we must not forget the much deeper roots of African theology that we find in the first phase of Christianization, when Christianity spread not only in Egypt but also far to the west and south of Egypt. Thus, already in the early centuries of Christianity, there were already prominent theologians working in Africa. These apostolic and patristic roots are an integral part of African theology and the very basis of the historical outcome that is today's postcolonial theology.⁵⁶

African theology today is based on the teachings of the first independent African churches of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and shapes Christianity in an African way of thinking and living. The Catholic Faculty of Theology at the University of Lovanium in Kinshasa, Congo, was considered the center of African theology at the beginning of this movement of thought. In 1968, the Colloquium on African

⁵³ Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology,' 335–343.

⁵⁴ Rosino Gibellini, *Teologické směry 20. století* (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2011), 478–497.

⁵⁵ Sara J. Fretheim, *Kwame Bediako and African Christian Scholarship: Emerging Religious Discourse in Twentieth-Century Ghana* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 33–45.

⁵⁶ Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology,' 335–343.

Theology was held there.⁵⁷ The colonial discourse, which destroys languages and cultures, has been sharply criticized, while a truly Christian discourse is to be Pentecostal and express itself in all languages and cultures.⁵⁸ It is emphasized, for example, that the European interpretation of theological themes using the apparatus of Greek philosophy does not mean that African interpretation, which has the inalienable right to honor the interpretive apparatus of its own, for example, Bantu philosophy, as well as many others, must do so.⁵⁹

In addition to the African theology spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa, there is also a South African black theology. Black theology in South Africa was born among Christians during the apartheid period (officially 1948–1994, in fact earlier), when the human dignity of black South Africans was not only trampled upon, but, according to many South African writers, literally taken away.⁴⁰ South African black theology is not unlike American black theology or Latin American liberation theology, but it is a distinct movement responding to the problems of black people during the period of unfreedom in South Africa.⁴¹ There are four phases (or waves) of South African black theology. The first phase has been described by Steve Biko as the black awakening, in which the black man – who has become a mere shell, a mere shadow of the real man, totally defeated, subjugated and asleep – awakened to consciousness.⁴² The black awakening initiative gradually restored his lost identity. Black theology began with an awakening of black self-awareness, an actualized self-acceptance, self-affirmation, and a redefinition of the relationship to whites in the context of Christian life. It was about reclaiming the identity and dignity that had been stolen from the black man under apartheid.⁴⁵

The second phase of South African black theology was perhaps best treated in the work of Allen Boesak, who takes the position that while American black theology was built on the explicit opposition of blacks and whites, South African black theology does not primarily fight against the white

⁵⁷ Gibellini, *Teologické směry*, 480.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Mazrui, 'Religion,' 817–839.

⁴⁰ Aarde, 'The Four Waves,' 105–116.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Allen Boesak, *Black Theology Black Power* (London: Mowbrays, 1978), 49–79.

⁴⁵ Aarde, 'The Four Waves,' 105–116.

man, but for the return of human dignity and human rights for every human being, that is, the black man, the racially mixed man, and, in the final analysis, does not exclude the white man. It may have been born as a struggle against the enslavement of blacks by whites, but it goes further and seeks to find a theology of coexistence of all races after the reclamation of black identity.⁴⁴

The third phase came in the form of the Black Theology Project, perhaps best captured in Mokgethi Motlhabi's article *Black Theology and Authority*. American black theology, according to the South African thinker, was too narrow, too self-consciously dictating a position to all black people around the world without understanding their situation in an entirely different context. South African black theology aimed not only to liberate the black man from the dictatorship (structural sin) of apartheid, but also, in a further step, to redefine social relations and build a new South Africa. The so-called third phase of South African black theology is already moving beyond the injustice of apartheid, beyond racial issues and the pains of the past: it is furthermore about human fulfilment and the fullness of human dignity in the post-apartheid world. One of the visible faces of the third phase was Itumeleng Mosala.⁴⁵

There is currently talk of a fourth phase of black theology, which is responding to the rapid social, economic and political changes in South Africa. The overarching hermeneutical starting point of South African black theology, according to thinkers there, is a contextual reading of scripture. The Old Testament exodus, where God not only delivers the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery but restores their identity and dignity, and what is more, in this difficult ordeal God reveals himself, makes himself known and even communicates his name to them, is seen as a central message for black theology by theologians there. Black theology sees this as an image of the black man's liberation from the bondage of apartheid, a return of identity and dignity, as well as a non-resentment and acknowledgement of love of neighbor to all, including whites.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Boesak, *Black Theology*, 49–79.

⁴⁵ A. Kee, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology: Reclaiming Liberation Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 87.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

3. Postcolonial theology

Postcolonial theology is an interdenominational Christian theological discipline that examines and critiques power structures, dominant social systems, and entrenched ideologies in order to effect social transformation that recognizes and affirms the perspectives of marginalized peoples, cultures, and identities. Secular studies of postcolonial theory have played a significant role in the emergence of this discipline of theological reflection.⁴⁷ The traditional advent of postcolonial studies came in 1978 with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*,⁴⁸ which exposed the Eurocentric assumptions attributed to Eastern life, creating a distorted reality in the imagination of the West that was imposed on the people of the East. Colonized entities were brutally deprived of their ability to speak for themselves, usually being the object of discourse and rarely the subject. Moreover, decolonization in the 20th century was problematic for multiple reasons. Attempts to revitalize state, cultural, and religious identities have often failed due to the lingering influence of colonialism and, later, disguised neo-colonialism.⁴⁹ Interpreters of postcolonial studies simultaneously praised and condemned their cultural heritage, and as a result of this dialectic, new forms of literary, artistic, historical, and cultural production began to embrace the so-called hybridity of postcolonialism, so that postcolonial theory effectively became a conciliatory rather than a critical category.⁵⁰

3.1 Postcolonial hybridity, epistemic violence, and mimicry

In this context, a postcolonial theology has emerged that places the colonized 'other' at the center of theological interpretations in which universalist Western categories are confronted through positive engagement. Postcolonial theology acknowledges difference and admits a multiplicity of responses in the hope of achieving a mutual exchange of perspectives from all voices. Postcolonial theology seeks the emancipation and authenticity of all marginalized or oppressed identities, including identity issues of nationality, culture, race, gender, and sexuality. Pragmatically based theologizing takes place within its

⁴⁷ Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology,' 335–343.

⁴⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁴⁹ Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology,' 335–343.

⁵⁰ Sophia Chirongoma and Esther Mombo, *Mother Earth, Postcolonial and Liberation Theologies* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 6–11.

own context in order to stimulate awareness, critical dialogue, and integration of ideas. The main goal of postcolonial theology is to critique hegemonic ideological constructions that make absolutist or totalitarian claims and to provide legitimacy to alternative theological views.⁵¹ In our opinion, these alternative theological views and currents should also include various theologies of syncretisms between Christianity (in various denominations) and one of the traditional African religions, as well as the theology of multiple religious identities. These currents were silenced and suppressed during the colonial period, but in our opinion they are not sufficiently reflected in contemporary postcolonial theology either.⁵² African influences in Christianity were eliminated as completely undesirable, as the colonizers' goal was to establish a purely European Christianity in Africa.⁵³ But it is precisely African Christianity, with its specific characteristics and emphases, that can and does have something to offer to Christianity worldwide.

Many Christian theologians in much of the formerly colonized world have turned to postcolonial theory as a theoretical way of dealing with the sinful consequences of colonialism in its various manifestations. In particular, these theologians use the postcolonial concept of hybridity as a way to explain the complex political agency of the subaltern (i.e., oppressed) subject. This concept was developed from the postcolonial experience to describe the ways in which subaltern subjects often adopt and confront the tools of the 'master' in the construction of new postcolonial identities. What might look like support for the oppressor may in fact be a complex process of articulating and activating subaltern agency in relation to colonial and indigenous cultural practices, languages, attitudes and religions. These are forms of intersectional theologizing.⁵⁴

Postcolonial hybridity manifests itself in the intermingling of Western and African approaches, which increasingly become indistinguishable. However, intermingling and accepting foreign influences is a common process in the religious sphere in Africa on a diachronic level, which we can trace far back in history. Traditional African religions have not been and are not characterized by their fixed immutability, but rather by their development, changeability, and acceptance of incoming

⁵¹ Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology,' 335–345.

⁵² Havelka, 'Křesťanství v Africe,' 291–309.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, 17.

influences from other religions, cultures, and traditions. It is difficult – if not impossible – to evaluate postcolonial hybridity unequivocally, as it brings both positive and negative realities.⁵⁵

Related to this topic is the concept of mimicry, which refers to imitation in faith and includes both positive acceptance and negative imitation (for personal gain, status, or relevance rather than genuine devotion). Mimicry is a concept that describes how colonized people imitate the culture of the colonizer (language, clothing, customs, religion), creating a similar (but not identical) copy that serves colonial control while also subtly subverting it. A relatively good example is the South African Herero people, who live mainly in Namibia and Botswana.⁵⁶

Subalternity refers to the condition of marginalized groups excluded from power structures, whose voices have been silenced by dominant colonial narratives, and this continues in postcolonial societies through the persistent power dynamics of class, caste, gender, and race. Postcolonial epistemic violence is the systematic silencing, devaluation, or erasure of non-Western knowledge systems, worldviews, and ways of knowing, which is a lasting legacy of colonialism, where dominant Western frameworks of knowledge are imposed, making other forms appear invalid or inferior, leading to intellectual subordination. Today, it is clearly evident in neocolonial (whether explicit or implicit) tendencies.⁵⁷

3.2 African biblical studies as a pioneer of postcolonial theology

African biblical studies was the first theological discipline to consistently apply postcolonial criticism. From postcolonial critical methods, African biblical studies drew inspiration from questions of expansion, domination, and imperialism in examining existing biblical interpretation. Indigenous African approaches to biblical interpretation, previously neglected or outright banned in colonial contexts in favor of European methodologies, are now being revitalized to make the Bible more intelligible to colonized cultures on their own terms and thought processes.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Havelka, 'Křesťanství v Africe,' 291–309.

⁵⁶ Havelka, *Africká náboženství*, 155–160.

⁵⁷ Havelka, 'Křesťanství v Africe,' 291–309.

⁵⁸ William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 683–687.

One of the leading proponents of postcolonial biblical studies, R. S. Sugirtharajah, in his monograph *The Bible and the Third World*, described three key hermeneutical approaches that emerged (not only) in Africa after the colonial period: 1. the native or vernacular approach, 2. the liberation approach, and 3. the postcolonial approach.⁵⁹ The author believes that an original African interpretation of the biblical texts is very important not only for the Africans themselves, who will become much closer and more understandable, but it can also be enriching for Western theology, as it will offer new, original approaches and insights. Postcolonial theology is still a young discipline. R. S. Sugirtharajah argues that its development is further hampered by the West's reluctance to analyse the theological implications of colonial imperialism.⁶⁰

Traditional African religions are, according to many theologians there, the essential source of postcolonial theology.⁶¹ While Mbiti understood traditional religions as a preparation for the gospel, the prevailing view of contemporary African theologians is that African Christianity must instead draw on traditional religions as a legitimate African resource, especially for their redemptive dimension. Based on our long-standing experience and research, this is happening with increasing intensity in Africa. The salvation of man, the salvation of humanity, is something that is crucial to many, if not most, indigenous African religions.⁶² John Pobee even postulates that an honestly conceived African theology must draw not only from traditional African religions, but also from traditional African music, mythology, proverbs, wisdom, prayer traditions, art, and rituals (such as rites of passage).⁶³ In Africa, open and honest interreligious dialogue is a prerequisite for creating an authentic postcolonial theology. Another necessary resource is African philosophies, such as the well-known philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Laureti Mageša reminds us that the inculturation of Christianity should not and even must not mean the destruction of African cultures, but their enrichment with the gospel.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 7–9.

⁶⁰ Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, 19–20.

⁶¹ John Pobee, 'The Sources of African Theology,' in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. J. Parratt (London: SPCK, 1987), 25–28.

⁶² Robert S. Heaney, *From Historical to Critical Post-Colonial Theology: The Contribution of John S. Mbiti and Jesse N. K. Mugambi* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2016), 94–98.

⁶³ Pobee, 'The Sources of African Theology,' 23–28.

⁶⁴ Heaney, *From Historical to Critical Post-Colonial Theology*, 94–98.

The debate on postcoloniality is crucial for contemporary postcolonial theology.⁶⁵ In our opinion, theology has played a pivotal role in the restoration of human rights, human dignity, accountability, cultural renewal and self-concept and self-esteem of the African man after the collapse of the colonial systems.⁶⁶

The colonial linguistic division of Africa into French and English (and marginally Portuguese) did not benefit the dialogue between the Christian communities at all. We repeatedly observed tensions between Anglophone and Francophone Africa during our field research. This then has a negative impact on the dialogue between Christianity and traditional religions.⁶⁷ Authors such as James N. Amanze, for example, even condition the future survival of Christianity in Africa on an active dialogue between traditional religions and Christianity.⁶⁸ But as Tinyiko Maluleke points out, there are also those African theologians who consider traditional African religions a threat to African Christianity and believe that these religions should be relegated to the dustbin of history in favour of the one true faith, namely Christianity.⁶⁹ According to our research, these authors are in a relatively obvious minority. In contrast, writers such as Kwame Bediako emphasize the centrality of traditional African religions to the development of African Christian theology and the role of tolerance, respect and dialogue as crucial to the survival and development of African Christianity.⁷⁰ Clearly, there are differing views in this area and that is legitimate. Postcolonial theology has multiple strands, schools of thought, and points of view; there is also a legitimate plurality of opinion. Increasingly, there is talk in Africa of a postcolonial theology that must benefit from Africa's religious heritage,⁷¹ for Africa is known among theologians there as the most religious continent – religion plays a very key role in the lives of Africans.⁷²

⁶⁵ Bongmba, *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, 4–6.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Benedict Ssettuuma Jr., *Inculturation: Towards an Integral Approach for Ownership, Permanence and Relevance of Christianity for a People* (Kampala: Angel Agencies, 2010), 51–65.

⁶⁸ James N. Amanze, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Africa* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1998), 197.

⁶⁹ Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology,' 335–343.

⁷⁰ Bongmba, *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, 15.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology,' 335–343.

3.3 The African contribution to theology freed from reactionary attitudes

Africans place great emphasis on liturgy, as religious festivals, mass-attended ceremonies that are religious-cultural-social events and significantly cement society, were and are very important in traditional religions. As part of his participant observation, the author visited hundreds of traditional ceremonies, religious services, and festivals across the continent, and always observed the extraordinary importance that the entire community attached to these events. This is why African churches are usually completely full and place special emphasis on singing and dancing in the liturgy. Religion in Africa is primarily social in character, only secondarily personal and intimate worship, which in many places in the West is rather the opposite. While in the Western cultural environment it is relatively easy to separate culture from religion and non-believers or non-Christians can live in this culture without any problems, in traditional African cultures it is different: culture and religion are one social unit, they cannot be separated, there is no noticeable boundary between them. Where Christianity has become inculturated in Africa, it forms an integral part of social reality, yet many Christians there do not renounce the traditional religious roots of their identity.⁷³ We are not afraid to claim that syncretism – in a completely neutral tone – is one of the most accurate single-word (and therefore highly simplifying) characteristics of African religious life.

Chammah J. Kaunda lists as the elementary sources of African theology: the Bible, Christian traditions (he consistently uses the plural) and their theological heritage, ecumenical historical experiences, African traditional religions, African cultures and African history, contemporary issues and experiences across Africa and in the diaspora, related scientific disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, philosophy and others, the teachings of indigenous African churches, and all religious and non-religious African worldviews.⁷⁴

We see, therefore, that the dialogue between contemporary African Christianity and traditional African religions is not only desirable and appropriate for African Christianity, but downright necessary and

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Chammah J. Kaunda, 'Sources of African Theology,' in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (London, New York: Routledge, 2022), 57–70.

structuring. In fact, postcolonial theology itself draws at least in part from this dialogue, and even directly emerges.⁷⁵

While some white missionaries in the second phase of the Christianization of Africa claimed that sub-Saharan Africans had not arrived at any real philosophy or religion, today's African theologians emphasize that the opposite is true. Before the arrival of the white missionaries, Africans had their various philosophies and had diverse religions based on faith and trust in God.⁷⁶ Some religions professed one God (e.g., the religion of the Ethiopian Mursi, the religion of the Namibian Himba, the religion of the Senegalese Serer, and others),⁷⁷ other religions professed a supreme creator God and subordinate lesser deities and spirits (e.g. Benin Vodun, Nigerian Yoruba religion, Nigerian Bori, and others),⁷⁸ other religions acknowledged the existence of a creator God but focused their practice more on man and his self-knowledge (e.g. Gabonese Bwiti, Nigerian Jaju, and others).⁷⁹

Nor is it true that, as the white missionaries pointed out, all these religions were so-called evil cults, that is, that they were devilish or outright Satanic cults. Witchcraft did and still does exist in Africa – and it is indeed a pressing social issue –, but most traditional religions emphasized in their teachings the need for moral and ethical growth of man and selfless help to one's fellow man. Certainly, on the other hand, the definition of fellow man varied and sometimes applied only to an ethnic group or clan or just an extended family. It is also necessary to add, in order to illustrate the overall reality perceived by the missionaries, that many of these traditional religions practiced human sacrifice in places until the beginning of the 20th century, when they officially ceased after strong pressure from the Catholic Church in Africa.⁸⁰ The reality of African religiosity is complex and multilayered, and this moment is also a legitimate source of postcolonial theology. In our opinion, it should not shy away from the problematic moments of pre-colonial African history.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Havelka, *Africká náboženství*, 77–86.

⁷⁷ Ondřej Havelka, 'Náboženství afrických etnik Himbů a Hererů: nejvyšší bůh Mukuru a jeho násilná transformace v Trojjediného,' *Dingir* 25, no. 3 (2022): 86–88.

⁷⁸ Havelka, 'Synkretismus katolického křesťanství,' 149–174.

⁷⁹ Havelka, 'The Syncretism of the Gabonese Bwiti Religion,' 145–159.

⁸⁰ John W. Kinney, 'The Theology of John Mbiti: His Sources, Norms and Method,' *Occasional Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (1979): 65–66.

In recent years, there has been a growing thesis among African theologians that a fruitful and mutually open, respectful and tolerant dialogue between African Christianity and traditional African religions is essential for the future survival of Christianity (of all denominations represented on the continent) in Africa, not merely for its development.⁸¹ Interest in revitalizing traditional religions is currently growing, the momentum of Islamic mission is also high and successful, and it should also be added that the number of non-religious or explicit atheists is increasing in many countries, which was not the case in Africa until recently, and countries like Madagascar now report 21.9% of people without religion.⁸² This should also be a new topic in contemporary postcolonial theology, which, according to our research, has been largely absent thus far.⁸³

To contextualise the need for dialogue, it is essential to bear in mind that multiple religious identities are common in sub-Saharan Africa. J. O. Awolalu documents that many African Muslims and Christians practice some traditional religions at the same time without syncretizing them.⁸⁴ In favour of multiple religious identities in Africa is the fact that Africans understand Christianity as a religion that brings mainly eschatological fruits, i.e. salvation and eternal life after physical death, while traditional religions are oriented towards the present moment, the well-being and good here and now, in this life. In this, according to many Africans, they complement each other perfectly and lead them precisely to a multiple religious identity, without seeing any contradiction in such an attitude.⁸⁵

From the point of view of theological anthropology, it is also significant that in African philosophies man is always viewed holistically, as a unity of soul and body, where matter is not seen as a diminished form of being, as was the case with some currents of ancient Greek philosophy that were adopted by some prominent Western theologians. This dualism of soul and body developed in Greek philosophy is alien

⁸¹ Amanze, 'Dialogue,' 73–84.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Havelka, 'The Yoruba Religion,' 43–52.

⁸⁴ J. O. Awolalu, 'What is African Traditional Religion?', *Studies in Comparative Religion* 10, no. 2 (1976): 1–10.

⁸⁵ Henry J. Mugabe, 'Salvation from an African Perspective,' *Indian Journal of Theology* 36, no. 1 (1994): 31–42.

to both African philosophies and the biblical message.⁸⁶ Man is understood in both as a unity of soul and body. Soul and body do not stand in some kind of opposition. This is also why the dialogue between African Christianity and traditional religions on anthropological issues is consensual on both sides, with no major points of conflict.⁸⁷

The fact that the supreme God in different traditional religions – having different names in different regions, for example Nyambi for the Botswana Hambukush – is the same God named by Christians as God the Father contributes significantly to the dialogue. A consensus can be traced in Africa that the supreme God is one and the same, only locally called differently.⁸⁸ It is also true that in traditional religions there is a great emphasis on the cult of ancestors, and some theologians therefore develop Christology in the position of Christ as the new Adam – the new ancestor. They thus reconcile the confession of Christ's redemptive reality and the cult of ancestors. It must be added, however, that other African theologians see in this an excessive departure from Christian orthodoxy, even to the point of heresy.⁸⁹ Parallels can also be found between the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, marriage and priesthood with the traditional rites of passage at birth, adolescence, marriage and traditional priestly ordination.⁹⁰

Authors on postcolonial theology emphasize that it is primarily a theology of dignity and identity, as it is a response to a time when conquerors and colonizers have reprehensibly alienated Africans from their human dignity and identity. Human dignity and self-identity becomes a prerequisite for any genuine dialogue, and so African Christians in dialogue with followers of traditional religions must respect the dignity and identity of the other side of the dialogue and also be aware of their own dignity and identity, so that in the future (not only in Africa) the reprehensible white man colonial monologue of destroying human dignity and identity on the basis of skin colour and technological superiority is not repeated.⁹¹ According to Maluleke, the dialogue should not lack love, forgiveness and a commitment to help the poor

⁸⁶ Adewale J. Adelakun, 'A Theoretical Reflection on Mbiti's Concept of Salvation in African Christianity,' *Nebula* 8, no. 1 (2011): 26–35.

⁸⁷ Amanze, 'Dialogue,' 73–84.

⁸⁸ Amanze, *African Traditional Religions*, 323–325.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Aarde, 'The Four Waves,' 105–116.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

(which in Africa often means people living in real poverty).⁹² African postcolonial theology wants to speak out against any oppression on account of any otherness.⁹⁵

The attitude of the white missionaries in the second phase was pro-colonization also because the missionaries were to provide ‘civilization’ for the natives for the colonizing authorities. There was essentially no dialogue with the natives; for the missionaries, the natives were simply subjects of Christianization who had to draw a thick line under their previous lives and learn to live and believe the right way – or Western way – because until the arrival of the missionaries they had lived wrongly and believed wrongly or rather devilishly.⁹⁴ For this reason too, many of the primarily political anti-colonial organizations fighting for independence also advocated the restoration of traditional religions, because they saw colonizers and Christian missionaries as two sides of the same occupation coin.⁹⁵

Given the situation of colonial oppression and the loss of black identity under white supremacy, African theologians have noted two major Old Testament stories. South African liberation theology emphasizes the exodus, when God rescues the Hebrew people and leads them out of slavery and into freedom. Analogously, theologians there see the liberation of the black people from apartheid. African theologians who engage in so-called reconstruction theology in turn emphasize the story of the Babylonian exile and the post-exilic restoration of the cult of Yahweh, the rebuilding of the temple, and the recovery of identity and self-esteem. In the same way, Africans gradually regained their identity, independence and self-confidence after the collapse of colonial rule.⁹⁶

Conclusion: new topics and outlook for the future

In the dialogue between African Christianity and traditional religions, African Christians must constantly remind themselves of the

⁹² Tinyiko S. Maluleke, ‘The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans: An Emerging Paradigm of Post-Cold War and Post-Apartheid Black and African Theology,’ *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108, no. 1 (2000): 19–37.

⁹⁵ Aarde, ‘The Four Waves,’ 105–116.

⁹⁴ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, ‘From Reconstruction to Reaffirmation,’ in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (London, New York: Routledge, 2022), 151–167.

⁹⁵ Maluleke, ‘The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans,’ 19–37.

⁹⁶ Mugambi, ‘From Reconstruction to Reaffirmation,’ 151–167.

revealed biblical truth that every human being is the image of God, and therefore every human being, regardless of his or her current denomination, must be treated accordingly by the Christian who honours the Bible as the word of God in the word of man.⁹⁷ After all, Jesus approached all people with love and an offer to follow him. According to this simple paradigm, interreligious dialogue should be conducted by African Christians: approaching different believers with love and respect and rather showing their position and possibly inspiring them to follow and deepen their interest. But not to coerce, not to disrespect the alterity, not to diminish its professed religion, for these methodological errors were abundantly committed by white missionaries.⁹⁸

A major current topic in postcolonial theology in Africa is the attitude towards local syncretisms between Christianity and traditional religions, as has been repeatedly mentioned. During his twenty years of work in Africa, the author has observed a growing interest in indigenous African religions among African Christians. One example is the Gabonese religion of Bwiti, based on the consumption of the iboga root,⁹⁹ which has strong psychedelic effects. The complex religious system of Bwiti, with its long tradition, is unique among the indigenous African religions and cults: it is not about worship, it is exclusively about self-knowledge, spiritual insight into the essence of reality, unveiling the spiritual veil, encountering oneself in the innermost sense of the word.¹⁰⁰

While years ago, most Gabonese officially professed Christianity (in several denominations) and also revered and practiced the Bwiti religion, albeit not openly, today the situation is essentially very similar, but openly opposite: millions of people officially profess the Bwiti religion but continue to live their Christianity. It is precisely in Gabon that we can see that the attitude towards syncretisms is key to contemporary postcolonial theology, as most Gabonese did not reject Bwiti twenty

⁹⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 198–212.

⁹⁸ Jesse Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 2005), 111–128. We are now speaking of a balance that has been achieved on many levels. We are speaking of balance and harmony in interfaith dialogue, which, unfortunately, has not always been a given; we are speaking of interracial balance; and we are also speaking of a balance between, on the one hand, the radical rejection of all Western influence and, on the other hand, the uncritical acceptance of Western traditions.

⁹⁹ Tabernanthe iboga is a tropical shrub belonging to the Apocynaceae family.

¹⁰⁰ J. W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 470–489.

years ago, just as they do not reject Christianity today. In fact, they live and practice a syncretism of Christianity and Bwiti with various local emphases. In shaping the relationship to African syncretisms, we see further steps in contemporary postcolonial theology. According to our research, the relationship of postcolonial theology to syncretism today is mostly tolerant, respectful, and fruitful in its efforts to find theological intersections and syntheses. However, we also find prominent authors who take a more cautious or even dismissive stance. In any case, the multi-layered relationship to syncretisms is a specific feature of African postcolonial theology and has clear potential to bring new ideas and directions to global theology.

According to contemporary African theologians, African postcolonial theology today must stop looking to the past and look to the future. It must ask itself what original things it can offer the world.¹⁰¹ In our opinion, postcolonial theology should not only study the syncretisms of Christianity and traditional African religions, but also seriously address a topic that has so far been dealt with mainly by religious scholars, namely the widespread phenomenon of multiple religious identities in Africa. Many Africans feel that they are true Christians and at the same time true followers of one of the traditional religions (in exceptional cases, even more than one), without syncretically mixing traditions. Such an attitude raises a number of serious questions for future postcolonial theology, as the growing wave of interest in traditional African religions among African Christians cannot be ignored.

*Catholic Theological Faculty
Charles University in Prague
Thákurova 3, Praha 6, 160 00
Czechia
E-mail: ondrej.havelka@ktf.cuni.cz*

¹⁰¹ Maluleke, 'Postcolonial Theology,' 335–343.