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Introducing the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology

Wanjiku M. Kihuha and
Joshua Robert Barron

Is African Christianity theologically shallow? It is not, thanks in part to the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology. In this article, two ASET leaders describe the organization's vision and accomplishments and encourage theologians everywhere to engage with the exciting work emerging from Africa.

Christianity in Africa is often perceived as 'a mile wide but an inch deep',¹ as merely an expression of colonial imperialism or of 'American religious hegemony',² or as deeply infected by the prosperity gospel.³ Certainly, Christianity in Africa will always need reformation—*semper reformanda!*—but this is true everywhere, not just in Africa. In fact, depending upon the metrics chosen, one could argue that Christianity is now both wider and deeper in Africa than in North America or Western Europe.

Obviously, such facile analogies are inherently flawed; when we say 'deep', what are we measuring? Self-identification to surveyors, degree of allegiance to Christ, visible degree of Christian virtue in a community, or number of seminary graduates? In actuality, in both the West and in Africa, there are places where Christianity is either shallow or simply absent and other places of great depth. One area of

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1 See A. O. Balcomb, "'A Hundred Miles Wide, But Only a Few Inches Deep!'"? Sounding the Depth of Christian Faith in Africa', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 140 (July 2011): 20, 22.

2 Mark Shaw, 'Robert Wuthnow and World Christianity: A Response to *Boundless Faith*', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 36, no. 4 (2012): 181.

3 E.g. Conrad Mbewe, 'Prosperity Teaching Has Replaced True Gospel in Africa', The Gospel Coalition, 25 June 2015, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47402>; for a more balanced assessment of the prosperity gospel in Africa, see Joshua Robert Barron, 'Is the Prosperity Gospel, Gospel? An Examination of the Prosperity and Productivity Gospels in African Christianity', *Conspectus* 33, no. 1 (April 2022): 88–103, which is reprinted with minor revisions in this issue of the *Evangelical Review of Theology*.

encouragingly increasing depth is within African evangelical theology, and one useful metric is the growth of the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology (ASET).

This community of evangelicals engaged in theological scholarship for the African church and society is playing a vital role in promoting and strengthening the African church and advancing theological discourse worldwide. ASET was established in July 2010, with a mission to enhance African Christians' spiritual, social and intellectual growth by providing various educational and theological resources and a platform for African voices and perspectives to be heard. Since its inception, ASET has consistently strived to promote research and sustained theological reflection on critical issues facing Africa, by African Christians and those working within African contexts.⁴ ASET has helped to deepen the understanding of African Christianity and its place in the global theological discourse by fostering evangelical theological scholarship in Africa while addressing several areas, as discussed in this short essay.

The value of ASET in global theological discourse

Advancing evangelical African theology

ASET has emerged as a major advocate for the development of a theological framework that is firmly based in the African setting. It promotes contextual theology through its numerous publications and conferences, so as to better address the demands and difficulties experienced by African communities while also advancing and enhancing the theological conversation on a global scale. ASET accomplishes this by responding to the problems that the African church and society are confronting, from an evangelical standpoint and in a manner that is acceptable for African situations. ASET events and publications encourage adherence to biblical principles, business ethics, original and critical thought, and Christ-like humility. ASET's dedication to advancing African theology also empowers African theologians by giving them a stage on which to claim ownership.

Supporting cultural sensitivity and Pan-Africanism

ASET is vocal in promoting a spirit of Pan-Africanism that does theology while paying attention to African cultural settings. In addition to advocating the ideals of self-determination, social fairness and economic empowerment, it highlights the value of identifying and enjoying the rich diversity of African cultural history. In this regard, ASET plays a critical role in influencing the conversation surrounding Pan-Africanism by promoting cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in its activities and discussions. ASET is committed to fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness and is cognizant of the diversity and wealth of African civilizations.

Adding theological value to African philosophy

Africa has a rich theological heritage to draw upon, dating back to the patristic and even apostolic eras. ASET encourages its researchers, theologians and other

⁴ Gregory Crofford, 'What Is the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology?' Langham Partnership, 31 January 2018, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47403>.

members to recognize the importance of integrating theological thought into African philosophy, allowing for a more thorough understanding of African spirituality and worldview. The two fields are frequently treated in isolation, ignoring their interconnectedness. The rich and intricate beliefs, rituals and practices that have influenced the African continent for ages can be revealed through this integration, which offers a rare and profound opportunity to explore the depths of African spirituality and its connections with philosophical inquiry.

Providing a forum for African scholars to participate in global theological discourse

By enabling its scholars and theologians to draw on Africa's rich and diverse perspectives, influenced by its distinct historical, social and cultural contexts, ASET plays a crucial role in encouraging diversity in theological discussions around the world. ASET urges scholars and theologians to include African viewpoints in their theological discussions. Papers presented at ASET conferences speak to African contextual realities and are representative of African Christianity across the continent. Furthermore, the materials published in ASET volumes are accessible to scholars around the world, providing an opportunity for Christians in different regions of the globe to learn from each other. These many viewpoints expand our understanding of faith and spirituality by challenging and reshaping traditional Western theological frameworks. ASET supports a worldwide theological debate that is more intelligent, nuanced and reflective of the variety of human experiences thanks to promoting inclusion and comprehensiveness. The knowledge of faith and spirituality is enriched by these varied viewpoints, which contest and modify Western theological frameworks. The value of reciprocal learning between African theologians and their counterparts internationally is another way in which ASET emphasizes the significance of fostering global theological discourse.

ASET conferences and publications

Since 2011, ASET has hosted an annual theological conference. Starting with the fifth conference, held in Nairobi in 2015, the best papers presented have been included as chapters in the edited volumes of the ASET Series, published by Langham Global Library. Each book in the series 'explores what it means for Christianity to think and speak "African" ... not just in theory, but also by addressing some of the "nuts and bolts" issues of Christianity as it is experienced in Africa today.'⁵ Contributors represent African countries from Botswana to South Sudan, Kenya to Ghana, and Nigeria to South Africa, as well as Europe and North America. Eight volumes are currently available:

1. *Christianity and Suffering: African Perspectives* (2017)
2. *African Contextual Realities* (2018)
3. *Governance and Christian Higher Education in the African Context* (2019)
4. *God and Creation* (2019)
5. *Forgiveness, Peacemaking, and Reconciliation* (2020)

⁵ Rodney L. Reed, 'Preface', in *African Christian Realities*, ASET Series 2, ed. Rodney L. Reed (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018), xi–xii.

6. *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christology in Africa* (2021)
7. *The Holy Spirit in African Christianity* (2022)
8. *Salvation in African Christianity* (2023)

Each of these volumes deserves a place on the shelves of seminary libraries and in the personal collections of pastors and scholars. All eight remain in print and can be purchased from the bookseller of your choice or ordered directly from Langham Literature;⁶ they are also available on digital platforms such as Logos and Kindle. This year's conference was on the theme 'On This Rock I Will Build My Church: Ecclesiology in Africa'; chapters are currently being edited to appear as volume 9 in 2024.

ASET's 14th annual conference will be held at Pan Africa Christian University in Nairobi, Kenya on 8–9 March 2024. It will be a hybrid conference that can be attended either in person or online. The theme is 'The Mission of God and God's Church: Missiology in African Christianity' and the keynote speaker will be Malawian missiologist Harvey Kwiyani, the founding editor of *Missio Africanus: The Journal of African Missiology* and CEO of the UK-based Global Connections. ASET has received a record number of submissions for the 2024 conference.

Twenty-seven years ago, Andrew Walls astutely (and perhaps prophetically) observed, 'African Christianity must be seen as a component of contemporary *representative* Christianity, the standard Christianity of the present age, a demonstration model of its character. That is, we may need to look at Africa today, in order to understand Christianity itself.'⁷ This statement is now perhaps truer than ever. Within the ASET community, we are striving to be authentically Christian and authentically biblical. But this does not mean that African Christianity will look like 16th-century German Christianity, 19th-century British Christianity, or 20th-century American Christianity. We should rather remain authentically African. It should be well recognized by now that 'crossing cultural frontiers is not only a prerequisite for the spread of the Christian movement; it is also the means whereby the worldwide community of faith increasingly experiences the fullness of the Gospel.'⁸ ASET's annual conferences and the resulting books of the ASET Series represent one way in which African Christianity can help the worldwide community of Christian believers to increasingly experience the fullness of the gospel.

6 See https://langhamliterature.org/books?series_id=4329.

7 Andrew F. Walls, 'Introduction: African Christianity in the History of Religions', in *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew Walls (Edinburgh: Centre for African Studies, 1996), 3.

8 Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 70. Hanciles is perhaps alluding to the title of Andrew F. Walls's book, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity*, ed. Mark R. Gornik (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017).