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African theological education and the need for curriculum responsiveness to African Union's Agenda 2063

ABSTRACT

This article considers the development of African theological education with the new imperative to support the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the need to engage global processes of development. By employing the strategic focus of curriculum design and content that focuses on African realities, theological education can support this transformative agenda. Expanding access to quality theological education aligns with Agenda 2063's emphasis on quality education. However, for African theological education to remain relevant and effective, beyond denominational myopia and internal ecclesial concerns, it must gain significant traction in the political, social, and economic spheres of modern-day Africa. A theology of transformation to prepare the Church as an agent of change can be instructive. To consider this task, this article reflects on integrative curriculum design as a means that educates for the required competencies, including ethical leadership, with an outward focus.

1. INTRODUCTION

For a few decades now, theological education and pastoral formation have been undergoing global change caused by the effects of globalisation (Naidoo 2017), the evolution of communication tools, rationalisation developments within the church and its educational establishments,

> with a crisis in vocation with regard to the ordained and lay ministry within the Church and the competing and adversarial interests of liberal, radical and conservative theological establishments (Werner 2009:37).

Likewise, over the past 50 years, African theology and theological education have been active and productive fields of study. They are mainly concerned with the same general issues that drive other African academic disciplines, namely,

> a desire to break free of a colonial intellectual legacy, to establish distinctly African approaches to its field of endeavour and to see its work serve the common good of the continent in which it works (Carpenter & Kooistra 2014:34).

A theological analysis of progress should aim to comprehend the church's prophetic function in addressing the intricate societal challenges confronting the African continent. This impacts on theological education which should result in a profound, genuine engagement with the Gospel on both a cultural and personal level. According to Karecki (2003:74),

> the outer work of social transformation is not disjoined from the inner task of personal transformation; they are intimately related and work together for the development of the human person and society.

The importance of education stems from the needs of a society, the sharing and transmission of communal spiritual and moral values, and the intimate relationship between education and work. Education must bring quality and fulfilment into human life. Thus, the spiritual and moral development of human beings, through the development of religious leadership, must serve as the foundation for any discourse regarding Africa's development, which has implications for other aspects of progress. As Bediako (2000:16) states "our theology has to be done in a way that it touches the African most deeply".

For African theological education to remain relevant and effective, it must gain significant traction in the political, social, and economic spheres of modern-day Africa. New research shows that African theologians are advancing their field of study, by acquiring a new perspective on the way in which the Christian faith interacts with contemporary African realities (Tinéou 2017:294-295). However, it is debatable whether this is sufficiently mainstreamed, given the insular foci of the church. Then again, how well have African theologians conceptualised the need for structural, systemic, and institutional transformation? Has theology sufficiently reimagined itself to make a responsible and meaningful social contribution to a better Africa? These are questions of credibility and legitimisation. Agenda 2063 provides another opportunity for theological education to reflect on its contribution thus far.

This article focuses on the imperative to support the African Union's Agenda 2063, not as simply another governmental policy issue. Instead, the church's engagement in development issues is its answer to the *missio Dei* mandate to extend care and justice to the continent. For example, a key feature of Agenda 2063 is the need for ethical and effective leadership. In this regard, theological education has always incorporated leadership training that emphasises integrity, accountability, and servant leadership, which are crucial for good governance and social transformation. Yet somehow, this is not translating to the community, especially when religious leaders are corrupt. Ethical values should be integrated into the curriculum to prepare leaders who are committed to the common good. This article concentrates on the instrument, that is, the curriculum as the vehicle to deliver on Agenda 2063 and its challenges, as well as the needed content to support an outward focus. Curriculum design is a continuous, analytical, recurring, and introspective process. Effective curriculum design should also integrate the "knowing, acting, and being" that constitute the intended "triple engagement" in education, as defined by Barnett and Coates (2005:67). In this way, the "product" of theology results in a well-rounded individual who can contribute to the integration and interpretation of social realities, providing prophetic critique and mobilising for public action, thereby positively shaping society.

2.   AGENDA 2063: THE AFRICA WE WANT AND RELIGION

Despite its abundant human and natural resources, Africa is widely considered to be the least developed continent globally and significantly adds to the number of people living below the world's poverty line. As a result of diseases, conflict, and poverty, nations in Africa appear to be in a constant state of disorder, which makes it challenging for children and adults to continue their education. Unlike the earlier age of the immediate post-independence leaders who sought to uplift African citizens and campaigned for social equality, the accumulation of personal riches is now a defining characteristic of African leadership (Kimenyi 2015:40). Agenda 2063 is a call to action for the African population to actively engage in shaping the desired future of Africa, while avoiding the repetition of historical errors. Adopted at Africa Union's 2013 Golden Jubilee Summit of the Formation of The Organization of African Unity/African Union, "Agenda 2063: The Africa we want" is an all-encompassing blueprint for the structural transformation of Africa. It has a seven-point agenda, quoted directly from Agenda 2063:

1. A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development.

2. An integrated continent, politically united, based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa's renaissance.

3. An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law.

4. A peaceful and secure Africa.

5. An Africa with strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics.

6. An Africa whose development is people driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children.

7. Africa as a strong, united, and influential global player and partner (AUC 2014:23).

Considering globalisation, Agenda 2063 addresses a wide range of topics, including identity, political independence, self-determination, and socio-economic development. However, it encounters significant obstacles such as

> insufficient resources for its successful and efficient implementation, as well as a lack of dedication from African leaders and the African Union itself (El Fassi & Aggad 2014:65).

This phenomenon is a result of the generally acknowledged viewpoint that African leaders openly support positions in which they do not genuinely believe or completely endorse. According to Akumbu and Jukanovich (2024:3),

> The AU in alignment with Agenda 2063 has created a list of 15 flagship projects, but the only project related to education is a virtual e-university, which aims to increase access to higher education using information, communication, and technology (ICT) programs concurrently. The AU does not clearly state how these projects will be accomplished, nor is there any accountability for the implementation of the goals.

Still, the African Union has been successful in advancing well-known ideas such as the "African Renaissance" and "African solutions to African challenges", which, despite many disagreements, appear to be the best paths to constructing the Africa that is desired (Addaney 2018:185).

Since Africa is a religious and predominantly Christian society, Africa's religious energies must be used to challenge outdated discriminatory social customs to build a progressive society, since traditional thinking is embedded in religious and cultural ways. Education and learning are not merely an academic exercise but rather a process of permanently changing and maintaining attitudes at the level of the person, the organisation, and

the community. This suggests that it is necessary to implement measures that foster a shift in the thinking of individuals and develop "the capacity of Africa's human resource through education, research, and knowledge acquisition" (Addaney 2018:185).

The indication for theological education is that it does have societal implications beyond its limited scope within seminaries and church congregations. Chitando (2009) argues that theology curricula in Africa should engage issues of political literacy, masculinity, and public health. According to Hadebe (2007:32),

> one of the aims of theology is to connect beliefs about God to current social contexts and life experiences. Each religion has resources that they use to develop their theology.

In this way, theological and religious education can be considered public education, regardless of whether governments acknowledge this or not. This education can assist Africans in identifying potential solutions as they are entangled between various forces and have no recourse as they struggle to survive (Agang 2020:4). For buy-in to be realised, the African Union needs to create monitoring mechanisms to ensure that educational institutions are accomplishing the development goals of their environment, in order to fulfil Agenda 2063. The obvious issue on this premise is: Is religious or theological education intended to assist these transformative objectives?

Agenda 2063 does acknowledge religion, as Aspiration 5 states,

> Africa is a continent of people with religious and spiritual beliefs, which play a profound role in the construction of the African identity and social interaction (AUC 2014:8).

It does however go against "all forms of politicisation of religion and religious extremism" (AUC 2014:9), recognising that religious beliefs or theologies shape moral and ethical standards. Clearly, if Agenda 2063 values are not incorporated into the current theological educational institutions and policies, ownership at the grassroots and involvement in realising it cannot exist. Sustainable educational implementation would require visionary leadership in theological education and the need to develop future innovative leaders focused on a special combination of human capacities and competencies that is people centred. An earlier All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC 2019:1) commitment on theological education stated that it is

> committed to theological training, pastoral and spiritual formation to meet the needs of the people … regulation of ministry practices, teachings of stewardship and servant leadership; developing pastoral care models which cater to the holistic human needs.

To develop this type of leader of competence and integrity will involve holistic development through integrated curriculum design. More than simply imparting a specific style of thinking to students, training calls for the constructive integration of that way of thinking with actions and behaviours. Knowledge is important, but holistic development must extend to integrated human development. Since all aspects of life are interwoven, the educational process at theological colleges ought to be constantly connected to the lives of its students. This will be explored in detail, but first some background on theological education enterprise.

3.   DEVELOPMENTS IN AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Theological education in Africa is very diverse. One is always mindful of the many contexts, identities, and challenges. Thus, to essentialise theological training would be detrimental. Every aspect related to Africa must be subjective, temporary, and dependent on the specific circumstances, since context has a key role in shaping theological thinking. The task before us is to establish our own interpretations of sustainable theological education that are suitable for our own circumstances and location. According to Bediako (1991:15), "we need to drink from our own wells". Asserting identity in Africa is influenced by location and positionality, which can significantly impact on one's sense of self. In this regard, theological education has played a role in the cultural renaissance promoted by Agenda 2063, by affirming African cultural identity and heritage. It has provided a platform for critical engagement with traditional beliefs and practices, promoting a theology that is contextually relevant and demonstrates the progression of an African theological education.

3.1   Engaging African realities

Africa has defied foreign domination and established its own dynamic viewpoints. For instance, following years of dysfunction and neglect, regional theological associations, founded by the Theological Education Fund and the All-Africa Council of Churches (AACC), have resumed regular meetings (Mugambi 2013:120). Even though

> Africans are fashioning out their own ways of being it finds itself in a new place, its thinkers and leaders are desperately looking for a new language and new framework (Maluleke 2006:50).

The difficulty still exists of the "historically imported categories" from the West that do not describe adequately the actual experience of the majority of African Christians (Bediako 2000:16). This is still driven by Western funding

agencies who invest in theological education infrastructure "as evidenced in the strength of the missionary influence in terms of numbers, resources, expertise and power" (Gifford 1998:23).

African theology must continue to discover methods to maintain discourse channels and more effectively distribute its work if it is to reclaim the concentration and rigour of its ancestors. Intellectually, it has gained some traction, but it might benefit from new guidelines, a sharper focus on the social realities of modern Africa, and a new injection of findings and understanding from other fields. African scholars need to become more self-consciously innovative, and theory driven. Tiénou has repeatedly emphasised two concerns (in Carpenter & Kooistra 2014:52):

> - the need for theologians to attend fully to present-day 'African realities' in all its expressions - the issue of Christianity's correlation with its African context has been rightly taken as cardinal;

> – the need for theologians' best ideas for ministry and witness in and through the churches to reach out to pastors and lay leaders 'on the ground' – a closer link between theory formation and actual practice.

As evident from above, the African social context is now becoming a major element to be examined. By claiming alternate knowledges, Africans can potentially escape the definition that a discourse has given them.

3.2   Attention to world Christianity

The global North is no longer the model that sets norms for the rest of the globe. Following the first major change from Hebrew culture to Hellenistic culture and the second during the European missionary expansion, the consequences of this third major transformation process of world Christianity are noteworthy (Balia & Kim 2010). In their own theological reflections, the global South has grown increasingly aware of, and contextualised their new theological innovations. We find refashioned pieties based on spiritual world views and supernatural energies of the Holy which is in direct opposition to the preference of rationality of the West. Everywhere, there is a significant role for new charismatic or autonomous churches with a more evangelical, Pentecostal, or indigenous perspective. The rise of the many renewal movements in Africa is itself an indication of grassroots responses. Some are vibrant examples of contextualisation, to which theological education will have to reach out. Western theological academia has been charged

> for not fully realizing the potentials of African Christianity coming of age, and not listening to the articulation of their distinct and new theological voices (Walls 2000:2).

3.3   Decolonialising theological education

Theological education is working towards decolonising harmful patterns of relating, built into persons, interpersonal relationships, as well as communal and institutional identities. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:335) argues that

> African nations are only politically decolonized, and [that] Africans are still mentally, economically, culturally, and socially stunted by continued Western domination.

He demonstrates how African conceptions of modernity are directly derived from Western conceptions, and he contends that Africans must completely overcome colonialism to avoid continuing to stay at the bottom of global rankings.

Decoloniality as a perspective focuses on "coloniality of knowledge, coloniality of being and the coloniality of power" (Mignolo 2011:47).

> Teasing out epistemological issues, the politics of knowledge gene-ration, as well as questions of who generates which knowledge, and for what purpose (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:335)

are the main objectives of the "coloniality of knowledge". It is known that the moment an African child enters a school, church, or university, s/he usually starts a journey of alienation from their African surroundings. Fanon's (1963) "zone of being and the zone of non-being" is linked to a "coloniality of being". This idea talks about how African people were re-articulated, based on racialised images of otherness and how they are made to feel less important. Finally, a "coloniality of power" refers to people who have been placed into hierarchical relationships of power and abuse because of colonisation. This was especially clear in South Africa, where racism is still rooted in theological institutions, while whiteness, privilege, and power-based resistance cultures persist (Naidoo 2016:5). Decolonising a western curriculum entails more than the mere inclusion of African issues in curricula; it also addresses the frequently unrecognised cultural, epistemological, and ecclesiastical assumptions and mindsets that are perpetuated.

4.   THE CHALLENGES OF THEOLOGICAL TRAINING AT INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

While theological education is making its African advance, it also has its own inherent challenges. For example, while historical theological programmes are struggling to be authentically contextual and critical, some of these emergent training centres are comfortable in promoting a consumerist training, of course, developed elsewhere. In numerous instances, theological institutions have evolved into credentialing bodies, employing degrees and

diplomas to ascertain eligibility for employment within the church. According to Kalu (2006:234), the mushrooming of theological education has traumatised theological education in Africa, and he asks: "[W]ho can control all these institutions and ensure an accredited performance, a liberating curriculum and adequate infrastructure?".

For theological education to be sustainable, it needs a new "social imaginary" that changes how people think, act, and organise, a new way of being human, in line with Agenda 2063. Pobee (1997:62) spoke of the viability of theological education at the World Council of Churches consultation in 1996:

> Viability does not only refer to the ability to maintain and sustain inherited institutional forms of ministry and education. Viability is about the ability to give life, to renew, to transform society and peoples as well as congregations.

For this reason, a long-term type of theological education should be developed that can bring new life and renew the church's institutional identity.

Theological education in Africa has historically been organised along denominational lines, from the influence of the missionary movement. Even with rapid church growth, theological training institutions persevere in financial hardship and are unable to cover a large portion of the operating expenses. Many theological institutions are deficient in critical areas, including personnel, infrastructures, libraries, research, and publication, as well as inadequate internet connectivity.

At an institutional level, there is a difference between policy imperatives and lived realities, which would need revision to align itself to the noble goals of Agenda 2063. Instead of engaging the social realities, there is more of perpetuation of the status quo, unquestioning agreement to denominational doctrines and practices,

> where the education system is supposed to train people to be obedient, conformist, not think too much, do what you're told, stay passive, don't cause any crisis in democracy (Cahalan 2017:78).

The inward focus is mainly from the pressure of denominations and the type of content learnt; a heavy concentration on biblical and theological competencies with hardly any emphasis on social analysis (Naidoo 2021:15). Teaching mostly focuses on an academic study with textual interpretation and doctrinal exposition brought on by the traditional Western paradigm. It is fragmented, sequential learning, where students learn different "packages" of disciplinary knowledge and are expected to complete assignments to show mastery of the knowledge.

In addition, the perennial division between theory and practice has been detrimental; doctrine, tradition, and scripture are classified as theory, while experience, action, and circumstances are considered practice. The tension between theory and practice has not been as easy, with theory dominating over practice, with the pastoral and practical remaining an afterthought. Instead of having a stronger relationship to other subdisciplines to demonstrate the overlap and interdependence of ministry, courses on pastoral practices are taught in isolation. Serious concerns regarding what constitutes knowledge and who is involved in its production are brought to light by theory-practice conflicts. Furthermore, theological disciplines may not meaningfully communicate with one another, because they have become so diverse. Every discipline has its own procedures and methodology, thus, its own unique language. Students do not presume that these various learning procedures interact in ways that mutually inform each other. As a result, students find it difficult to integrate the vocational aspects with the academic components. Standardised theological education, using this four-fold paradigm (bible, history, doctrine, and practice), has run its course and is a thing of the past – this is where the end-product is a person who resembles everyone else subjected to the same process.

Unfortunately, current academic theological education prepares theologians-theoreticians and "such an education creates a critical mind in students, making criticism the virtue that is being rewarded" (Wolterstorff *et al.* 2004:62). This results in theological institutions creating an educated elite that often has lost touch with ordinary people. This kind of compartmentalist education makes it difficult for African leadership to fulfil the social, communal, and cultural obligations that are expected of it (Naidoo 2022:7).

This disconnection in learning speaks to the need for appropriate curriculum design and content. The idea of integration was always left to the student to evidence, whereas now a shift has occurred educationally where the institution and the curriculum need to evidence integration with appropriate learning outcomes (Cahalan 2017:78). Unfortunately, in African institutions, with increasing responsibility and the focus of sustaining the "economic viability, little attention paid to theological, methodological or curriculum issues" (LeMarquand & Galgalo 2004:15), the latter is mostly attended to in the case of an accreditation exercise. Experimentation in curriculum design involves risk-taking and the courage to focus on learning. Yet with the lack of time and resources, it has been easier to use a curriculum "from elsewhere" (Naidoo 2021:16).

5. REALISING INTEGRATIVE CURRICULUM DESIGN

Curriculum renewal offers an opportunity to reconsider the way in which theological education and its content are delivered. Theological institutions must become more intentional and take responsibility, and this involves a new culture of learning. If theological education can extend beyond internal denominational issues and engage the social sciences, it can contribute to developing a better Africa. Bosch's (1991) concept of "transforming mission" involves the transformation of the learning material regarding "politics, preferences and praxis" (De Gruchy 2003:451). These approaches include the reformation of the current teaching and learning methods and curriculum transformation to bring a people-centred focus on theological students, their communities, and the way in which theology itself is constructed.

Integration as an educational strategy offers these possibilities. It is concerned with connections in human experience (Miller 2019:32), relation-ships between the mind and body, between academic disciplines, between the individual and the community, between the transpersonal and the personal self, as well as between linear thinking and intuitive methods of understanding. An integrative approach involves "thinking about what schools are for, about the sources of curriculum, and about the uses of knowledge" (Beane 1991:26). Nevertheless, achieving deep congruence is complex, even the term "integration" suggests that disciplinary formats are the "normal" state of a curriculum, and that integration is a step above this status quo (Naidoo 2021:17). Miller (2019:32) reminds us that

> curriculum integration does not abandon the skills and understandings that are specific to the individual key learning areas, but it is a means of enhancing those areas across key learning areas.

Kolb (1981) views integration as an advanced capacity as part of the experiential learning model describing three phases of human growth: acquisition, specialisation, and integration. This suggests that foundational learning is required as information, but learning must progress to integrative learning where perspectives from the disciplines are connected and relate to each other. It makes sense to integrate the learning of theology with the actual practice of ministry when re-evaluating certain aspects of the design and methodology, even as the theology is being assimilated.

The first core concept for implementation in designing curriculum is the acknowledgement of the pedagogical dimensions: a known educational pur-pose making the transition from teacher-focused delivery to student-centred learning, incorporating constructivist and humanist learning approaches that

consider the identity and social location of the student. Because educational philosophies address the "how" and "why" of an educational system, as well as the institution's purpose and aims, it is critical that they are pertinent to the cultural context of a theological institution. Having clarity of purpose gives direction to the curriculum and educational practices, as each organisation identifies its primary objective and employs a strategic approach to achieve it. Hence, in curriculum design, the idea that "one-size-fits-all" can never make sense. The learning experience should be infused with the institution's climate, preventing fragmentation and unintended contradictions, where all stakeholders in the education process, including church stakeholders, are committed to a well-known educational philosophy. Ideally, each theological institution should be capable of articulating the rationale behind the interrelations of experiences, contexts, and requirements, as well as the intentional connection between the sections of the institution and the curriculum.

A second core concept is incorporating the theological grounding of the holistic "formation" of the student in theological education, by focusing on cultivating the whole person to live more consciously (Naidoo 2021:14). The expectation that students will embrace the process of integration is undermined if the learning environment fails to demonstrate how the various components of this reality are integrated to create a cohesive whole.

A third core concept is that, because the goals of theological education are transformation and meaning-making, learning needs to be pertinent and in line with the context's lived needs and world view. The integrative approach can facilitate this, because it encourages contextual learning that is essentially cross-disciplinary. It breaks down knowledge or discipline hierarchies and starts with people in their own environments, often from the bottom up. In this instance, socially relevant content can be selected that can help people think critically and come up with good ideas for new ways of doing things, thus supporting communities. For example, the church can be a powerful advocate for peace and conflict resolution. By fostering interfaith dialogue and promoting the values of tolerance and non-violence, theological education can contribute towards creating a stable environment aligned with the goals of Agenda 2063.

There is a paucity of literature on theological institutions' implementation of the African Union Agenda. However, an institution that embraces the values of sustainable development is the School of Theology in Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This entity has reconfigured and merged disciplines to create a thematic focus of "Theology and Development" to "focus on the socio-political context in which the church lives today in Africa" (De Gruchy 2003:451). More recently, research into theological education

and African cities evidenced 15 theological institutions in 13 African cities implementing curriculum changes involving courses in urban theology or ministry (De Beer 2022).

There are many other contextual challenges within African contexts and curriculum content like justice and human rights, issues such as gender equality, human trafficking, and the rights of minorities that can serve the community issues. In this way, aspects of student learning are brought together holistically, highlighting concern with connections in human experience, thereby supporting student learning.

The pedagogical methods used in this model are an engaged mode of student-centred learning that uses a praxis methodology, as it involves an action-reflection dimension (Cullen *et al.* 2012:15). This enables students to experience the process of theology as a communal enterprise. In addition, various other methodologies include the experiential, dialogical, cooperative, and discovery learning, along with collaborations for purposeful work-integrated learning with churches, ministry supervisors, and other ministry contexts. Working in this collaborative way, students engage in consensus-building, debate, reflection, and personal sharing. In this way, grassroots theology is developed, where the student and teacher are alert to happenings in the community and a transformative impact is realised for both the students and the community. Theological institutions, in turn, become hubs of cultural affirmation rather than cultural estrangement (Mugambi 2013:118).

6. CONCLUSION

The significance and strategic value of Agenda 2063 necessitate that it is not solely entrusted to the African Union (Boaheng 2022:226). The revitalisation of Africa should be spearheaded by the people of faith residing on the continent, who should include and assimilate Agenda 2063 into their educational curriculum to make its actualisation feasible. With the emerging mandate of Agenda 2063, theological institutions must involve a theology of transformation, where the goal is to prepare the church as an agent of change that brings the possibility of hope.

This article underlined the need for theological education to support this mandate, considering the recurring challenges with the context. The strategic focus of an integrated curriculum design approach could serve the transformative agenda where integration is appreciated as both a value and a goal. It can make education more meaningful and fulfilling for the African, revealing a humanising education that is rooted in African philosophy and world view.

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