The Usefulness of the Lutheran Confessions in the African World

By Joseph Randrianasolo

Abstract: The Malagasy Lutheran Church is one of the fastest growing churches in Africa. Maturing after having been seeded by Western missionaries, the confessional bond to Lutheran history is flowering differently within (1) the development of African contextual theologies and (2) ecumenical dynamics involving Lutherans and other Christian traditions.

Key Terms: Confession, Malagasy Lutheran Church, African Contextual Theologies.

The Malagasy Lutheran Church is well known as one of the fast growing churches among the Lutheran Churches in Africa during recent decades. It has adopted the Three Ecumenical Creeds, the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms as its confessions. At the same time, it exerts an exceptional outreach towards other Christian denominations through its Department of Lutheran Spiritual Awakening. Through a close cooperation of the same Department with the Department of In-country Mission, it has gained and keeps gaining tremendous momentum by converting adherents of non-Christian religions (ancestor-worshippers and Muslims) to faith in Jesus Christ within the Malagasy Lutheran Church and by strengthening the Christian spirituality of its membership. Despite the fact that the church has only adopted the basic books of the Lutheran Confessions as its confessional books, this case presents itself as a challenge to the traditional understanding of the usefulness of Lutheran Confessions in the African world.

In this article, we shall discuss the usefulness of the Lutheran Confessions in the African world under two topics of burning urgency. First, we shall focus our attention on the African efforts to appropriate confessional reflection by means of contextual theologies. Second, we shall examine possibilities of ecumenical conversations between African Lutherans and other Christian denominations. In order to avoid useless generalizations in our discussion, we will take the Malagasy Lutheran Church as a case study. Our hope is to sketch the future of the Lutheran Confessions in the African world in the next half century by presenting their actual working out in one of today’s African contexts.

Lutheran Confessions vis-à-vis African Contextual Theologies

A confession requires someone who confesses it. Such a person has been molded in a specific context that gives meaning to the professed confession. This is why we take the Malagasy Lutheran Church as an example throughout our discussion. We shall present a summary of the theological efforts undertaken by theologians in the African world. Then, we shall try to demonstrate the usefulness of the Lutheran Confessions vis-à-vis African contextual theologies.

Contextualization of theology results from two factors. First, it stems from the fact that Christians of a given country in a given context feel the need to frame theology in their context so that they may understand their confessions. There is a move, at the level of theology, from being a receiving and dependent church to becoming a producing and
creative one. This shows a growth towards a theological maturity. Second, it denotes a dynamic interaction between the Word of God and the contextual language of the concerned Christians. By contextual language, we mean, any means of communication in a given context, in which a dynamic exchange takes place between the sender of the message, the message itself, and the receiver of the message.

At the beginning of this reflection, we want to make clear that by contextualization we do not intend to reduce the place of Christianity born out of mission based on the gospel and summarized and explained through the Lutheran Confessions to that of non-Christian religions. We do not open faith dialogue either with African traditional ancestor-worship religions or with other religions on the assumption that all religions worship the same God. The claim of Christian faith in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ being the Son of God, the only Savior through whom alone we are justified by faith, excludes any consideration of other faiths as other ways that lead to God our Heavenly Father and his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes, strategies of dialogue with non-Christian religions or of searching for common ground with them have been used for the sake of praeparatio evangelica. Luther’s explanation of the Ten Commandments, both in the Small and in the Large Catechisms, refuses any compromise with other gods.

African traditional ancestor-worship religions pervade all tenets of African cultures. They all tend to express everyday happenings using spiritual explanations. They have been handed down from generation to generation for centuries and centuries. They have become deeply anchored within the subconscious of every African people. They keep surfacing in personal and societal dealings. We strongly believe that the “mechanics of theology” cannot lead to a total and deep metanoia. By mechanics of theology, we mean human attempts to relate the Word of God to contextual situations. We need more. We need more than ethics and phenomenology.

The “mechanics of theology” have always been used to clothe theology more and more with African vestments. Their goal is to make the gospel more “receivable” and “believable.” Adaptation endeavors to adapt the gospel to the culture. Inculturation wraps the gospel with local culture. Incarnation is already very suggestive. It incarnates universal truths of theology in the local context. Contextualization includes these intentions to root the gospel in local soil. All attempts to express the universal truths of Christian doctrine aim at tangible practical expressions. The context guides the content of the text and gives meaning to it. Black theology was formulated to fight over against apartheid in South Africa. Theological considerations of African cultures were articulated to raise African cultures and identities from their downtrodden situation, having suffered long years of colonization and injustice, to a level of healthy self-esteem. The afore-mentioned “mechanics of theology” require human actions to adapt to the contextual, phenomenological situation.

However, we cannot minimize the esprit behind these attempts of the “mechanics of theology” to restore human dignity and to find ways to express what the church believes—this church that was once in the field of mission but is now well implanted and grounded in the local soil. It is the esprit of outreach. “Go and make disciples of all nations.” But trust in human abilities to articulate the gospel on their own, that is, on the phenomenological level, in order to transform the stone heart of an ancestor-worshipper into a heart of flesh of a disciple of Christ, on which the Spirit of God can write down his Word, is doomed to failure. Such “mechanics” cannot produce the fruits of metanoia. It is not by chance that we have used the terms “mechanics of theology” to gather into “one bouquet” all human attempts to make the gospel more receivable and more believable in the African context. It will end with a fateful deceit. The number of Christians in the visible Church do not directly correspond to those in the invisible one. And this is the concern of the Lutheran Confessions.

The Usefulness of the Lutheran Confessions vis-à-vis African Contextual Theologies

Contextual theologies did not start in the twentieth century. Since the birth of the church, it had to
wrestle with the following ever on-going question: “How can we preserve the gospel uncontaminated by false doctrines or untwisted by the context but at the same time speaking to and understood by the same context?” That question is not about how to make the gospel relevant to the context. The gospel cannot be forged and hammered out to fit the context while it should address that very context. This has been the esprit of the church for centuries in spreading the gospel from Jerusalem to the end of the earth and in fighting doctrinal deviations and heresies. This is still the living esprit of the Lutheran Confessions.

Content of text and context have been the main concerns of the Lutheran Confessions. African contextual theologies have the same concerns. But the goals are divergent. While the latter have been more concerned with contextual relevancy and ethics, the former have been preoccupied with the core of the gospel confronting, affronting, and addressing contextual issues. If the context is used as the launching pad for theology, then, the focus in the gospel will change according to the mood of the context. There was a time when the attention was drawn to the idea that God was siding with the poor, that Jesus Christ was black, that the metaphor of Great Ancestor could portray Christ and so on. The human side and human justice have been the human products searched for and thrust into the foreground. The core of the gospel, which is the divine justification of the sinner by faith, has been left behind in the background.

Do we mean that African theologians should not work hard enough to draw out the intellectual sweat necessary to produce contextual theologies? By no means! By stating that the goals are divergent, we do not want to insinuate that African contextual theologies and Lutheran confession exclude one another. On the contrary! Our main point is to show that the experiences of the Lutheran Confessions in dealing with contextual issues may be very useful for African contextual theologies. From this vantage point, good historical and contextual knowledge of the Lutheran Confessions offers an indisputable edge to African theologians articulating African contextual theologies. Repetitive readings of the Lutheran Confessions help in capturing clues from the aforementioned experiences.

Then, Lutheran Confessions may play the role of resource for methods and of inspirational debut and guide for shaping and formulating African contextual theologies. For example, whether one examines the Smalcald Articles, the Augsburg Confession or the Solid Declaration, the justification of the sinner by faith occupies the central turning point, and all other arguments and clarifications revolve around it. Reformation of the Mass, invocation of saints, interpretations of the sacrament of Baptism and that of the Holy Supper, veneration of relics and theological anthropology were reviewed under and through the critical principle of justification of the sinner by faith.

Centuries of the scholastic and papal monopoly over faith had forged a mixture of religious cultures and traditions, a blend of historical and political contexts. The Lutheran Confessions had to sort out all of these in order to let the justification of the sinner by faith shine. The content of the scriptural text purifies these various contexts from any synergistic tendencies. Sola Scriptura, sola fide and sola gratia are not just the theological basis of this critical principle. They also work as its testing parameters. From this point of view, the Lutheran Confessions can be classified as contextual theologies, although they are not imprisoned in time and space, precisely because their central point is universal in time and space. This is why the Lutheran Confessions can well play the role of resource materials for methods and of inspiration for formulating African contextual theologies.

The development of a “grass-roots” theology is among the Lutheran Confessions’ goals. They bring university theology down to the level of common people. They are thus also a form contextual theology. Two examples from the Lutheran Confessions stand out: the Small and the Large Catechisms. Both were intended for household use. Luther encouraged every Christian to read the catechisms daily and to apply their words to their daily Christian life. The goal is to ground Christian spirituality in the household, because alongside such down-to-earth explanations of Christian confession of faith there are well-chosen Bible passages that deepen and enrich these explanations. Faith touches the daily aspirations of the Christian household. The intimate
connection between Christian spirituality and daily life makes these two books of the Lutheran Confessions two indispensable foundation stones of Lutheran instruction in the Malagasy Lutheran Church. They are used in the preparation for baptism, in confirmation class, and in the training of “Mpiandry” or Shepherds.

The Malagasy Lutheran Church commissions lay people to become Mpiandry or Shepherds for lay ministries in the Fifohazana, which means Spiritual awakening. The Word of God is preached, taught and lived out with power and authority. This is the combination of Christian spirituality and daily life. It applies the principles of *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide* and *sola gratia* of the Lutheran Confessions to daily Christian practices. It seriously takes the local cultural context into account. It dedicates itself to evangelizing non-Christian people, to caring for those who are demon-possessed, and to learning the depth of Christian life through Bible studies and the performance of various charitable actions. A Mpiandry or Shepherd plays an important role in these lay ministries by volunteering their free time for this service.

We can confess that the theology lived out by the Fifohazana is a contextual theology which experiences a rapid success in the Malagasy Lutheran Church by drawing a large number of non-Christian believers to the Christian faith and by awakening Christians individually into Christian spirituality. The secret of the rapid growth of the Malagasy Lutheran Church membership in number and in conviction lies there. A woman leader of the Fifohazana, Mrs. Volahavana Germaine from Ankaramalaza, well-known under the nickname of Nenilava (Tall Mother), has gone to Norway, France and to United States in order to preach the gospel there. Now, other Lutheran Churches in the African world want to know more about the Fifohazana. It has experienced the same success in France. Theologian scholars from the Northern hemisphere come to the Malagasy Lutheran Church to study it. We can predict that the Fifohazana, as a Lutheran contextual theology inspired by and grounded in the Lutheran Confessions, will no longer be unknown or ignored by other Lutheran churches in the future. At the very least, it may inspire them in their dealing with the use the Lutheran Confessions in the daily spirituality and life of their members.

### Ecumenical Contributions of the Lutheran Confessions Among Different Christian Traditions

As mentioned above, the Lutheran Confessions place justification by faith into the foreground in their theological statements. Justification by faith was their critical principle for evaluating any emerging contextual theologies articulated by their opponents to detract from the Confessions’ positions. The strength of the Lutheran Confessions in their theological articulations is founded on the indivisible relation between soteriology and Christology, in which soteriology is placed first. Therefore, the *articulus justificationis* becomes the *praecipuus articulus* of Christian teaching. This very posture has allowed the Lutheran Confessions to emphasize that Christ alone (*solus Christus*) is our Propitiator. He is the only way to the Father.

This leads us to the primary universal task of the church: mission, which is God’s Word put into action. In this sense, mission should be an ecumenical action. We do not want to talk about ecumenism as casual discussion. This would reduce it to scholarly debates, actions that would not impact the spiritual life and involvement of Christians from all denominations concerning the Great Commission. It is true that the Lutheran Confessions are not directly concerned with the Great Commission. However, their core relates Christology and soteriology very closely and tightly through justification by faith. Only Christ can justify us by faith. He occupies the center of Christianity. Those who receive that justification by faith and live it out are called disciples of Christ. In this sense, the Lutheran Confessions may inspire both churches of any denominations in their evangelistic outreach and theologians in their common articulations of theologies of mission.

When we mention the interest of the spiritual life and involvement of Christians from all denominations,
we go back the level of grassroots theology and liturgy. We strongly believe that useful theologies should touch ordinary people. We set apart the Small and the Large Catechisms among the books of the Lutheran Confessions for their usefulness for these people. One of their main themes may be captured as the battle between the realm of Christ and that of Satan, which is expressed in these three terms: devil, flesh and world. Christ is the winner in this battle against all three. Close readings of these two popular books may help the church and theologians to elaborate literature for Christian spirituality on an ecumenical basis because these books are dealing with common and universal preoccupations. Common liturgies for ecumenical use may be forged out from this theme of the battle between Christ and Satan and that of the victory of Christ over Satan for the purpose of strengthening Christian spirituality and involvement in mission.

This constitutes precisely the dynamism of the liturgy of the casting out of demons and of laying on of hands in the Fifohazana of the Malagasy Lutheran Church. This liturgy consists of a short prayer, four fixed readings taken from the gospels, casting out of the demons, laying on of hands and a final prayer. Different shepherds recite the first and final prayers and the four readings. All present shepherds participate in the casting out of demons and laying on of hands. This liturgy has now been adopted in the Reformed Church. It is being studied both in the Roman Catholic Church and in the Anglican Church in Madagascar. Mpiandry or Shepherds commissioned in the Malagasy Lutheran Church but belonging to these four denominations are using it. We see now the ecumenical outreach of a grass root liturgy. When we talk about usefulness of the Lutheran Confessions in ecumenism, we are not talking about dreams and wishes but about events and realities taking place at the grass roots level. These facts may present themselves as a springboard for more theological reflection and for the development of liturgical practices by plunging more in the living water of the Lutheran Confessions or by reading the Bible through the lens of the Lutheran Confessions.¹

Conclusion

We conclude our reflections with great hope that continuous studies of Lutheran Confessions in the African world will shape African Lutheran churches and churches of different denominations as well. They may be taken as models for contextual theologies. Their evangelical thrust and dynamism will guide African theologians in their own theological formulations. More can be done in these directions in the next half-century.

Endnotes

¹. Editors’ note: The recent English translation of The Book of Concord [The Book of Concord, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000),] now includes the traditional appendix to the Small Catechism: Luther’s baptismal liturgy, with its exorcisms (pp. 371–375). This appendix, part of every Small Catechism published in Wittenberg during Luther’s lifetime, was included in some early printings of The Book of Concord in Saxony (1580) and Brandenburg (1581).