

"Crowded Churches and Empty Stomachs": The Paradox of Christianity and Poverty in the Congo-Zaire Opening a Way Towards a Post-Colonial Christianity

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“Crowded Churches and Empty Stomachs.”

The Paradox of Christianity and Poverty in the Congo-Zaire Opening a Way Towards a Post-Colonial Christianity.

A thesis by

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The end of this journey is also the beginning of another one that will lead me back to my motherland, the Congo-Zaire, where I hope to stand with the poor people of God, sharing their condition and working with them in order to break the chains of poverty.

My dearest hope is that this modest work contributes to empowering the oppressed daughters and sons of God, and helping them start turning the current page of colonization, and begin to write a new page of liberation.

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Abstract

“Crowded Churches and Empty Stomachs.”
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Opening a Way Towards a Post-Colonial Christianity.

- Jean Christian Ndoki Ndimba, SJ -

The title of this essay is deliberately provocative. It aims at drawing attention on the reality of Christian churches full everyday – not only on sundays – with people who everyday die from hunger. In the Congo-Zaire. Behind the image of crowded churches, I see the complex reality of Christianity, and behind the image of empty stomachs, I have in view the complex reality of poverty, oppression, violence and death. It is paradoxical that those two realities grow together.

This essay explores the sources of that paradox, going back to the first encounter of the people of the old Kongo Kingdom, and later on Congo-Zaire, with Christianity. It analyzes the relationships between Christianity and the poor throughout the history of the Congo-Zaire. It examines the message of salvation brought by Christianity and how it is related to the people’s conditions of life. The conclusion is tough, but unavoidable. First, Christianity during colonial times – which I call missionary Christianity – in the Congo-Zaire did not side with the poor. It served the interests of the powerful, to safeguard its own interests. It despised the way of life of the autochthonous and destroyed their identity. Second, Christianity today in the Congo-Zaire – which I call post-independence Christianity – struggles with the heritage of the colonial past, but it basically continues to function following the same model. We still live in the colonial settings.

Therefore, this for me is the key to resolving the paradox. Following the insights of postcolonial theories, turn the page of colonial Christianity, move towards what I call a “postcolonial Christianity.” That postcolonial Christianity should be informed by the African way of life (hence re-appropriating the values of the autochthonous) and rooted in the preferential option for the poor, which is the main principle at the heart of liberation theology. There lies a great challenge: how to actualize that postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire?

General Introduction

The following lines were born from a feeling of frustration. The frustration of experiencing abject poverty personally and in other people's flesh and mind; the frustration of having lived under a succession of corrupt and dictatorial political regimes; the frustration of living a never-ending cycle of violence, and yet living in a country where Christian faith is flourishing : the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) also known as Congo-Kinshasa, formerly Zaire.¹ Why does that powerful presence of Christianity not make much difference in our history of violence, corruption and poverty? Ugandan theologian, Emmanuel Katongole, experienced the same frustration, as he was sadly writing, "Christianity continues to grow and thrive in Africa, but so too grow the realities of poverty, violence and civil war."² The Congo-Zaire has a particularly growing Christianity. Since this is the case, one might expect great improvement in the conditions of life of the Congolese people. Rather, Congolese women, men and children are weighted down by various types of oppression: political, economic, social, and even religious. How are we to understand this paradox and situation and how might we resolve it?

My argument in this essay is twofold. The first part of my argument is that to understand the situation, one needs to find its sources, its root causes. I will uphold that the paradox comes from three sources. Firstly, it is due to the way Christianity was implanted in the Congo-Zaire, and the way it still functions today. Secondly, it is due to the relationships Christianity established with the poor. This has a big impact on the way the poor look at themselves and look at Christianity

¹ The country's name was changed several times in History: from Congo to Zaire, and then back to Congo. In this essay, I will be using the combined name "Congo-Zaire" rather than simply "Congo," to avoid any confusion with the other African country bearing the same name "Congo." Also, I do not like to use the political qualifier "Democratic Republic" which remains problematic for me.

² Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa. A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 1.

today. Thirdly, given that the main message of Christianity is about salvation, the paradox surfaces from the mistaken way not only in which salvation was promoted and continues to be promoted, but also the way in which it is understood in the Congo-Zaire. Hence, to resolve that paradox, we need first to analyze the way in which Christianity was brought to the Congo-Zaire, its relationships with the poor, and the understanding of salvation that was promoted. Yet it is not enough to look at the past. And that will be the second side of my argument. We also need to explore new paths for a more suitable and effective approach to salvation in the context of the Congo-Zaire today, and for a Christianity that allows people to get out of poverty.

In that perspective, I will organize my essay in three chapters. In the first chapter, I will briefly describe the context of the Congo-Zaire, highlighting the geographical, cultural, and socio-political aspects. In the same chapter, I will show how Christianity is flourishing. I will thus first refer to figures, and then show the vitality of the Church in the Congo-Zaire, based on the liturgical life, on the various works of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire, and the contribution of theologians. This will be contrasted with the recurring situation of poverty. In the whole essay, I will consider “poverty” as a paradigm encompassing economic aspects, but also political and anthropological ones. Hence, the concepts of “violence” or “oppression” will be treated as dimensions of poverty. After a depiction of the reality of poverty in the Congo-Zaire, I will explore its roots. To conclude that first part, I will discuss why this situation is paradoxical to me, and then reflect on the possibility of finding a way out.

In the second chapter, I will analyze the three most probable sources of that paradox. The first, as I just said, is the way Christianity arrived in the Congo-Zaire. That is, Christianity traveled in the same kit as the slave traders, conquerors and colonizers, and rejected or destroyed the African way of life. Here, I will review the history of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire, from its

beginnings in the early fifteenth century up to now. The second source is the ambiguous relationships that Christianity established with the powerful on the one hand, and with the poor on the other hand. The outcome of those relationships is that the poor were set aside, sacrificed to safeguard the interest of the powerful, and of the Church. The third source to analyze is the concept of salvation that Christianity upheld. I will briefly survey the various understandings of salvation that prevailed throughout the history of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire: first, the approach of salvation as “eternal life,” secondly the approach of salvation as “prosperity,” and thirdly the approach of salvation as “liberation.” I will assess each of these approaches, noting which ones have contributed and are still contributing to the paradox. The historical perspective taken for these various explorations will allow me to show that Christianity as lived today – that I designate as post-independence Christianity – deeply bears the stamp of the Christianity received from the European missionaries in colonial times – which I simply designate as missionary Christianity. Therefrom, the way out of the paradox resides in opening the way towards a postcolonial Christianity.

The third chapter deals with that perspective of postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire. I will start by explaining the concepts “postcolonialism” and the “postcolonial theory.” Then, I will thoroughly analyze two elements that should shape the postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire. The first element is the African way of life that was despised and rejected by missionary Christianity. It comprises several values that could help alleviate poverty. The postcolonial Christianity needs to commit in a critical re-appropriation of that way of life. I will use the case of the Kimbanguist Church, which is an African Instituted Church, to show how that re-appropriation is possible. The second element is the preferential option for the poor. After explaining that concept, mainly leaning on Gustavo Gutiérrez, I will explore three concrete ways

of implementing it in the context of Congo-Zaire in view of a postcolonial Christianity. The first way is conscientization and agency. That way is based on the fact that the worst damage Christianity caused to the Congo-Zaire is anthropological. Thus, it is essential that the Congolese become aware of that anthropological impoverishment, but also of their potentials and capabilities to transform that harm. Here I will use the insights of Paulo Freire on conscientization, and Amartya Sen on capabilities. The second way consists in empowering women. Indeed, in the Congo-Zaire, as well as in many countries, women are the poorest of the poor. Not only are they denied many rights but also, they suffer various types of violence, physical and moral. Here I will use the example of the Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai, to show how that empowerment of women is possible. The third way consist in caring for the earth. Poverty is linked with the irrational exploitation of resources. In the Congo-Zaire particularly, that irrational use of natural resources leads to violence war and more poverty. Thus, postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire should not only advocate for but also work hard to promote the care for the earth.

A general conclusion will summarize this journey and open the way for further reflections.

Chapter One: The Congo-Zaire: Context and Paradox

1. The Context of Congo-Zaire

1.1. Land of Abundant Natural Resources

The Congo-Zaire is a country situated at the center of Africa, and straddling the Equator. It is the second country in Africa in terms of surface. Indeed, it covers more than 2.3 million km,² and shares its borders with nine countries: Angola, Zambia, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, South-Sudan, Central Africa Republic and the Republic of Congo, also known as Congo-Brazzaville. With those neighboring countries, the Congo-Zaire shares not only borders, but also languages, ethnic groups and culture. This is due to the fact that the current political map of the African continent was drawn by European colonial powers, according to their interests, without taking into account the reality of the autochthonous. I will come back to that issue later on.

The Congo-Zaire itself comprises approximately 250 different ethnic groups, but most of them share many cultural traits. The total population is estimated to 77 million inhabitants, with more than 60% living in rural area.³ It is the most populated country in the Francophone Africa, the fourth most populated country in the whole Africa, and the nineteenth in the world. The rate of natural increase in the Congo-Zaire is among the highest of the world. Almost half of the population is below 15 years old. Life expectancy at birth was 59 in 2015.

The topography of the country includes a large river basin called “Cuvette Centrale,” a major valley, high plateaus, three mountain ranges and a low coastal plain. In terms of climate, the Congo-Zaire is divided into four regions. First, the equatorial climate zone, with very hot temperature (average 20°C), high humidity, and abundant rains the whole year. Precipitations may

³ From World Bank resources: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/drc/overview> accessed on March 28, 2017.

reach 1,800 mm per year. Secondly, the tropical climate zone found above and below the Equator. It comprises two distinct seasons: a dry (four months) and a rainy season (8 months, with an average of 1,600 mm per year). Thirdly, the Atlantic climate region, at the tiny west coast. It is still hot, but with a fewer precipitation (760 mm per year). Finally, the mountain climate zone is located in the plateaus and mountains of the Eastern part of the country. Temperatures are lower (the highest being annual 10 °C), but still with lot of precipitations (1, 320 mm).⁴

The Congo-Zaire is blessed with innumerable natural resources. It has an important hydrographic network, dominated by the Congo River, which is the second largest river in the world after the Amazon, as for the discharge; and the ninth longest in the world, with its 4,370 km. The Congo River drains the whole country, through many tributaries. Rivers and lakes in the Congo-Zaire brim with various kinds of fish. The Tanganyika lake, for instance, is home to at least 250 species of fish endemic to the lake. That makes the lake an important resource not only for people's alimentation, but also for the study of the evolution of species. Apart from fish, the various rivers and lakes, comprise "many crabs, shrimps, turtles, hippopotamuses, crocodiles, while nearby live thousands of pelicans, egrets, ducks, pygmy geese even smaller than ducks, kingfishers with scarlet beaks, five-foot-all purple herons, sacred ibises, white-tailed flycatchers, scarlet and black weaver birds, and fish-eating eagles."⁵

The majestic Congo River flows from the southeast of the country to the northwest, crossing the Equator, and then goes southwest down to the Atlantic Ocean. Besides, the Congo River is a tremendous potential source of hydroelectricity. It represents one-sixth of the world hydroelectric potential.⁶ In 1970, a five dams project of hydroelectricity, the *Inga Dam*, was

⁴ From *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* <https://www.britannica.com/place/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo#toc40791>, accessed march 28, 2017.

⁵ Robert B. Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa. A History of the Congo* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 2002), 3

⁶ Robert B. Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa*, 3.

launched. However, only two dams have been built, and they do not function to their full potential. In terms of energy, the Congo-Zaire can also count on the Kivu lake, which contains a reserve of 55 billion cubic meters of natural gas.⁷

Besides, the Congo-Zaire has 146 million hectares of forest, that is 56 percent of the African forests. “Within these forests, there are lichen- and moss-covered ebony, oak, mahogany, cedar, walnut, and rubber trees, as well as clumps of bamboo all tied together by lianas and flowering vines.”⁸ The Congo Basin is home to the second largest rain forest in the world, after the Amazonia. The Congo Basin Rain Forest “constitutes a quarter of the world’s remaining tropical forest, and provides almost a third of all of Africa’s vegetation’s cover.”⁹ It comprises a huge variety of trees usually rising to more than hundred feet (about 30 meters) overhead.¹⁰ It holds a great diversity of animals: “over a thousand species of birds, four hundred mammal species; and more than two hundred species of reptiles and amphibians, (...) gorillas, four thousand elephants, nine thousand chimpanzees. It is also home to the bonobo, a highly-endangered primate, and the threatened okapi, a cousin of the giraffe, and new species are still being discovered.”¹¹ The Congo-Zaire also has a tremendous potential for agricultural activities with 80 million hectares of arable lands: “the major food crops are cassava, corn, rice, plantains, and, to a lesser extent, bananas, beans, and peanuts.”¹² As for cash crops, the principal are “coffee, palm oil and palm

⁷ Ferdinand Muhigirwa Rusembuka, “Theological Perspectives on Governance in the Mining Sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” in *Just Sustainability. Technology, Ecology and Resource Extraction*, ed. Christiana Z. Peppard and Andrea Vicini (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 35.

⁸ Edgerton, 2.

⁹ Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), 260.

¹⁰ Edgerton, 3.

¹¹ Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 261.

¹² International Business Publications, *Congo, Democratic Republic. Foreign Policy and Government Guide* (Washington DC: IBP, 2008), 230.

kernel oil, sugar, cocoa, rubber, and tea. All are grown on large plantations. Cotton and tobacco are produced mainly on smallholdings.”¹³

The Congo-Zaire is worldly known for its vast mineral wealth. And in fact, the economy of the country is based on mining. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* shows how mineral resources are literally spread throughout the whole country. The Katanga, in the south, is a great producer of copper, cobalt, zinc, manganese, coal, silver, gold and above all uranium – needed in the nuclear industry. The Kivus in the east come up with gold, cassiterite, beryl, methane gas, and above all columbotantalite – a mineral highly needed in the computer and cellphone industries. The south-central regions are known as reservoir of iron and gem-quality diamonds, while the central region is famous for its industrial diamonds. The north and the northwest are sources of coal, gold, and iron bauxite. The coastal region offers offshore deposit of oil, as well as gold and bauxite.¹⁴ In sum, the Congo-Zaire contains more than 1, 100 minerals and precious metal identified. With all those minerals, the Congo-Zaire has the potential to become one of the richest countries on the African continent and a driver of African growth.¹⁵

1.2. Land of Turmoil, Instability and Uncertainty

The Congo-Zaire is a country in turmoil, and political instability. Violence regularly breaks all over the country, in spite of the presence of a special mission and forces of the United Nations¹⁶ for almost two decades. This year is particularly disturbed with an unprecedented political and economic crisis, combined with an endless war in the eastern regions, various militias in the center, and massacre of civilians all over the country. In fact, in December 2016, Joseph Kabila’s second

¹³ International Business Publications, *Congo, Democratic Republic*, 230.

¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* <https://www.britannica.com/place/Democratic-Republic-of-the-Congo#toc40791>, accessed march 28, 2017.

¹⁵ From World Bank resources: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/drc/overview> accessed on March 28, 2017.

¹⁶ MONUSCO : Mission de l’ONU pour la Stabilisation du Congo. (UN Mission for the Stabilization of the Congo).

and last term as president expired, but he still remains in power, deliberately violating the Constitution. No elections have been organized. As a matter of consequence, since February 2017, the president, the members of the parliament and the governors of provinces, are beyond their term. No institution is legitimate. The people, angry and hungry, demonstrated to demand elections, but the government reacted by violently repressing them, killing hundreds of people.

After months of negotiations, the Congolese Catholic Bishops Conference (CENCO)¹⁷ succeeded in brokering an agreement between the power and the opposition for a consensual transition, in view of organizing general elections by the end of the year. However, the agreement has not been implemented. And the decease of the main opposition leader, Etienne Tshisekedi, seems to have comforted Kabila in its desire to cling to power. Exhausted by the inconsistency and bad will of the politicians, the Bishops have dropped out their mediation. The future remains uncertain.

2. The Congolese Paradox: Growing Christianity and Growing Poverty

In that context, people are packed in Churches, while poverty is growing. Talking about Africa, Emmanuel Katongole considers that two images characterize the continent today: “churches and coffins.”¹⁸ Looking at the Congo-Zaire, I find two other images particularly fitting: “crowded churches and empty stomachs.” Indeed, the country is overwhelmingly Christian and at the same time extremely poor. In this section, I will deeply explore these two realities of the Congo-Zaire: on the one hand the fast-growing Christianity, and on the other hand the fast-growing poverty.

¹⁷ CENCO : Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo.

¹⁸ Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 29.

2.1. Congo-Zaire: A Fast-Growing Christianity

2.1.1. Impressive Figures

According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) of the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, Christianity is by far the main religion in the country: in 2010, Christians represented 95% of the population.¹⁹ In 1970, the percentage was 89,9. And the average annual growth rate is 3%, according to the same study.²⁰ The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, in Washington DC on its part, estimates the Christian population to 95.7% for the same year 2010, and adds that this represents 2.9% of the world Christian population.²¹ Among all Christian denominations, Roman Catholics represent the largest group, with about 47.3 % of the population, according to the Pew Research Center.²² The Directory of the Catholic Church in the Congo-Zaire estimates the Catholic population to 39,332,872 out of the 77,045,017 inhabitants.²³ This corresponds to 51.9 % of the population.

These figures are impressive and deserve further analysis, but this is outside the scope of this essay. Instead, I prefer to support them with other elements that confirm the dynamism of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire.

2.1.2. Beyond Figures: An "Exceptional Ecclesial Vitality"

Without reference to any statistics, after the Second Special Assembly of the Bishops for Africa (simply known as the Second Synod for Africa) in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI praised the

¹⁹ Center for the Study of Global Christianity, *Christianity in its Global Context, 1970-2020* (South Hamilton, MA: CSGC, 2013), 26.

²⁰ Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 26.

²¹ Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Global Christianity. A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2011), 11.

²² Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Global Christianity*, 23.

²³ CENCO, *Annuaire de l'Eglise Catholique en RD Congo* (Kinshasa : Editions du Secrétariat Général de la CENCO, 2013), 375.

“exceptional ecclesial vitality”²⁴ and the “Christian maturity”²⁵ of Africa. The Pope was certainly impressed by the vibrant liturgy of African churches and the vigor of African theologians’ discourses.

2.1.2.1.1. Lively Liturgies

Indeed, Africa has come up with very lively ways of celebrating the Sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. The most famous is the “Zairian Rite.” In fact, as Karl Rahner puts it, “the Celebration of the Eucharist is an absolutely central event in the Church.”²⁶ It is the memorial of the greatest event in the History: the redemption of humankind through the sacrifice of Jesus. In the early Church, it was already seen as the culmination of the ritual of Christian initiation. Nowadays, it is, among all the sacraments, the one celebrated most often. Moreover, “the Eucharist is the source of the other sacraments [and] the starting-point of all kerygmatic apostolic preaching in the Church.”²⁷ This makes it easy to understand why the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council insisted so much on the need to revise the rite of the Eucharist. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, they stated,

“the rite of the Mass is to be revised in such a way that the intrinsic nature and purpose of its several parts, as well as the connection between them may be more clearly manifested, and that the devout and active participation by the faithful may be more easily achieved.”²⁸

That recommendation opened the door to many experiments of liturgical adaptations. One of them began in 1969, in Kinshasa, Congo-Zaire, under the direction of Fr. Laurent Mpongo. Five years later a brochure was issued entitled “Towards an African Mass.” Then, there followed a

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, 3.

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, 4.

²⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 82.

²⁷ Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 82.

²⁸ Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*” n°50, in Austin Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Leominster: Fowler Wright Book, 1984), 17.

series of meetings and negotiations between the episcopate of Zaire and Rome. Finally, in 1988, “The Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire,” was officially promulgated and widely known around the world as the “Zairian rite” or the “Congolese rite.” Born in Kinshasa, the principles of this rite are “fidelity to the values of the Gospel, fidelity to the essential nature of the Catholic liturgy and fidelity to the religious and cultural heritage of Zaire.”²⁹ As Congolese theologian François Kabasele Lumbala writes, the Zairian rite was conceived as “a general framework, on the foundation of which regional and cultural differences will be added.”³⁰ Other African countries also adapted the Roman rite to their particular cultural contexts, even though these adaptations are not officially recognized, but most of them are based on the structure and the spirit of the Zairian rite.

Here, I would like to describe a little more that Zairian rite, as it is considered as one of the signs of the vitality of the Church in the Congo-Zaire, and in Africa in general. There are five major sequences in the celebration of the Eucharist according to the Zairian rite: the opening rites, the liturgy of the Word, the rites of penance and reconciliation, the liturgy of the Eucharist and the concluding rites.

Opening rites

A very important actor in the celebration of the Eucharist in Kinshasa is the “commentator” or “announcer.” Before the beginning of the celebration, while people are still gathering in the church or any other place of worship, the commentator welcomes them by various types of greetings. He gives the essence of the celebration and introduces the main celebrant. He then invites the people to stand up, sing and dance together with the choir, to enter the celebration. Thus, begins the entrance procession, from the main gate of the church.

²⁹ Phillip Tovey, *Inculturation: The Eucharist in Africa* (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1988), 35.

³⁰ François Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa. Liturgy and Inculturation* (New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1998), 29.

The procession is a long one. All the ministers sing and dance. Their vestments remind ceremonial wears of traditional chiefs. An acolyte heads the procession, carrying a censer. He opens the way for a large cross symbolizing the Christocentric character of the celebration. The minister carrying the cross is followed closely by two others with lighted candles. Sometimes, behind the acolytes with the candles, there are little girls dancing and singing. At the end of the procession, before the main celebrant, there are ministers charged with proclaiming the readings, one whom carries the book of the Gospel. They all pause before the altar and wait for the main celebrant. The arrival of the main celebrant concludes the procession; he bows and joins the others at the altar. He, then, venerates the altar by kissing it on the four sides, symbolizing the four cardinal points of the universe; then, he takes the censer and incenses the altar all around. Standing behind the altar and facing the people, the priest announces the theme of the celebration and greets the assembly using a particular formula. For example, the priest may say “The Lord be with you!” or “Peace! Fraternity! Joy!” Then, he calls the assembly to join him in the invocation of the saints and the ancestors:

“Dear sisters and brothers,
We are gathered here among us Christians.
Some have left us and have joined God’s Kingdom
Let us pray in union with them and with the entire court of Heaven.
May this holy sacrifice unite us with them as members of the same family” (translated from Lingala)

Then, together, they sing the invocation; calling upon saints and ancestors,

“-You, our ancestors	- Be with us.
- You who served the Lord with an upright heart...	- Be with us.
- Be with all those who offer this sacrifice today	- Be with us all.”

At the end of the invocation, the commentator invites the assembly to join the choir in singing and dancing to the glory of God. The main celebrant and the other ministers dance around the altar

while the assembly sings the *Gloria* to the rhythm of drums, gongs and other instruments. At the end of this hymn, the main celebrant says the opening prayer.

Liturgy of the Word

Soon after the opening prayer, the liturgy of the Word begins. The readers approach the main celebrant, kneel down, and ask for his benediction “so that the Holy Spirit may assist” them. He blesses them. Then, the commentator announces the readings of the day.

After this introduction, the reader begins a dialogue with the people of God gathered in the church. He asks them, generally in a song, if they want him to proclaim the word of God to them. After their approval, he begins to read. At the end, he sings again to invite them to accept the Word they have just heard. And the people respond, in a song, that they do accept.

After the first two readings, the commentator announces the proclamation of the Gospel. The priest or deacon goes to the altar, takes the book of the Gospel and presents it to the assembly, singing John 1:14, “The Word has become flesh.” The assembly sings in reply: “He is among us. Let us listen to Him.” Then, holding the book of the gospel, he joins four acolytes carrying candles, incense and censer. Dancing, they process to the lectern, while the assembly sings the *Alleluia*. During the proclamation of the Gospel, the assembly is asked to remain seated.

The proclamation of the Gospel is followed by the homily. This one is a moment of dialogue between the preacher and the assembly. Images, proverbs and short stories drawn from the traditional or popular wisdom are abundantly used to help the people penetrate the deep meaning of the Word of God just heard. The preacher uses questions and asks for the approval of the assembly. He sometimes walks in the midst of the assembly. At the end, he concludes by a triple question inviting the people not only to hear, but to receive the Word in their heart and to put it in practice. The response of the assembly comes in the Profession of faith. This becomes

thus a response of faith to the Word of God proclaimed in the readings and interpreted in the homily.

Rites of Penance and Reconciliation

After the proclamation of faith, come the rites of penance and reconciliation. This part is perceived as purification for the coming presence of the Holy. Enlightened by the Word of God, the people's hearts are made to realize how unworthy they are to stand in the presence of the Lord and partake God's meal. Here a more somber or serious atmosphere contrasts with the festive aspect of the beginning of the celebration. The intention is to express sorrow. Concrete imagery is used to introduce and lead the penitential rite. The main celebrant uses a particular formula to introduce the penitential rite, such as,

“Sisters and brothers,
The Word of God has opened our eyes.
We have heard and now we know.
Yet we have not always followed it properly.
So let us ask for the grace of God so that we can change our lives.”

Then, he goes on with images about the sin and mercy,

“Lord our God,
like the leech that sticks onto our skin and sucks our blood,
evil has come upon us and weakened our living power.
Who else can deliver us, apart from you, our Lord, Jesus Christ?
Lord, have mercy.”

After three verses of this type, the priest blesses some water and sprinkles the assembly with it. This rite appears as a sign of purification and also as a reminder of Christian baptism. The priest walks through the assembly, sprinkling all the people, whose heads are bowed, arms crossed on the breast as they sing a hymn that is baptismal in character. After the sprinkling, the priest implores God's mercy on the faithful and invites them to reconcile with one another and share a sign of Christ's peace. Reconciled with God and with one another, the people can now offer their petition to God. This prayer of the faithful ends the rites of penance and reconciliation.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

The liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the offertory rite. This latter is very important in the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist in Africa. People stand to offer their life to God from whom they have received everything. As a symbol, they bring various items, really fruit of the earth and fruit of their work. They gather them and, singing and dancing, bring them in procession to the altar. The main celebrant receives them at the foot of the altar. One of those who carry the offering says on behalf of the all community: *“Father, these are the gifts we have collected to show our communion.”* They also bring the bread and wine to be consecrated. The priest prays over the offerings and invites the assembly to stand up and enter deeply the mystery of the Eucharist.

The Preface and Eucharistic prayers are sung in dialogue with the assembly. These prayers are adapted and enriched with images that characterize traditional African experience of the Sacred: *“You are the Sun too bright to be looked at... You are the All Seer... You are the Master of Life.”* This is to emphasize the participation of the people of God, to let them really take part in the sacrament. The whole Canon flows like a rhythmic dialogue or a shared prayer where the priest says some parts and the people complete the others. During the Consecration, also sung, they all bow and acknowledge: *“O Christ, you are our God and Lord.”* The priest then invites the assembly to say the Lord’s Prayer, the Our Father. After that, the priest breaks the bread, and the assembly sings the Lamb of God. Then, people are invited to partake of the Holy Communion. After communion, they remain silent for a while. Thence, the commentator invites them to sing and dance in thanksgiving. When the thanksgiving song and dance is finished, the main celebrant says the concluding prayer.

Concluding Rites

The concluding rites are simple and short. They consist of various announcements by the commentator. This one also reminds what was celebrated and the texts that were read. Then, the main celebrant gives the final blessing and dismisses the assembly. The ministers quit the altar and get out of the place of worship, in a singing and dancing procession, as in the beginning of the celebration.

When outsiders witness the Zairian rite, they might be captured by the beauty and vigor of rituals, songs and dances, but not notice that these ritual gestures are the result of a deep and prolonged theological reflection. The lively liturgy of the Zairian rite illustrates the theology of Inculturation as lived in the Congo-Zaire, and in Africa in general. At the same time, rich theological reflection, research, and writing have been going on in the country for the last four decades.³¹ That theological activity is another element, beside statistics and lively liturgies, that attests to the vitality of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire.

2.1.2.1.2. A Rich Theological Activity³²

The “first sketch of an African theology”³³ was published in 1956 by a group of young Black priests. It is simply entitled *Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent*, which can be translated as “*Some Black Priests Wonder.*” In that publication, the authors explored the future of Christianity

³¹ To mention but a few Congolese theologians and publications : Tharcisse Tshibangu, *La théologie africaine*, Kinshasa 1987 ; Bakole wa Ilunga, *Chemins de libération*, Kananga 1978 ; Vincent Mulago, *La religion traditionnelle bantu et leur vision du monde*, Kinshasa 1973 ; Bénézet Bujo, *Morale Africaine et foi chrétienne*, Kinshasa 1980 ; Ntedika Konde, *La faculté de théologie et l’avenir de l’Eglise en Afrique*, Kinshasa 1975 ; Bimwenyi Kweshi, *Discours théologique négro-africain*, Paris 1981 ; Kabasele Lumbala, *Le Christianisme et l’Afrique : une chance réciproque*, Paris 1993 ; Claire Mbuyi, *Et la femme sauvera l’homme : et qui sauvera la femme ?* Kinshasa 1994 ; Ntima Nkanza, *Non, je ne mourrai pas, je vivrai. Méditation sur le cheminement christologique en Afrique* Kinshasa 1996 ; Kä Mana, *La nouvelle évangélisation en Afrique*, Yaoundé 2000 ; Simon-Pierre Boka, *Théologie africaine : Inculturation de la théologie* ; José Ngalula, *Du pouvoir de la piété populaire : enjeux théologiques de la crise Kimbanguiste*, Kinshasa 2007.

³² Even though focusing on the Congo-Zaire, I will not talk about “Congolese Theology,” but rather “African Theology” as is designated the theology that was developed in sub-Saharan Africa.

³³ Rosino Gibellini, “African Theologians Wonder and Make Some Proposals,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini, (New York: Orbis Books 1994), 6.

is Africa in the context of decolonization. Some years later, in 1960, the Faculty of Theology of the Lovanium University (now University of Kinshasa) witnessed an important debate between a Congolese student, Tharcisse Tshibangu (who will later on become a Catholic Bishop) and the Belgian Dean of the Faculty, Alfred Vanneste. The issue was the possibility of an “African theology.” The following decades gave credence to the views of the student against his master: a contextual African theology flourished. Born during the times of the independences, that theology was defined by two paradigms: on the one hand, the African culture, and, on the other hand, the African socio-political context.

In the first paradigm, culture is the expression of the identity, based on the African traditions and the values inherited from the past. According to this first view, the African context is defined basically by the elements of its cultures. From there, it follows that African theology should evolve in the framework of culture. It ought to be a “Theology of Inculturation.”

The second paradigm, the socio-political context refers to the socio-political conditions of life of the African people “today.” It points at the realities of poverty, oppression, dictatorships, and suffering. In this perspective, African theology ought to be a “Theology of Liberation.”

Up to present, inculturation has served as the most common framework for African theology. In that perspective, African theologians developed various African liturgies, christologies, ecclesiologies, spiritualities and moral theologies. Among the liturgies, we already mentioned the Zairian rite, which tends at organizing the liturgy in a way that takes into account the African culture. Among the christologies, beside the approach to Christ as Ancestor, the most famous is the Christology of healing, where Christ is seen as the Healer, the one who cures community and individuals from their various diseases. The best known African formulation of ecclesiology is the model of “the Church as God’s family,” that was largely discussed during the

First African Synod in 1995 and constitutes the substance of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Ecclesia in Africa” by Pope John Paul II.

With regard to spiritualities, African theologians drew on African wisdom and praxis to build up mainly a spirituality of environmental care. Finally, African moral theologies tend to revive the values of the African traditions within Christianity: the most recurrent issue is marriage. Later, I will take up these approaches to African theology based on inculturation.

The framework of liberation has not been explored as deeply as the framework of inculturation. The main movement in that trend is the Black Liberation theology born in South Africa during apartheid. Although not South Africans, some names like Jean-Marc Ela, Laurenti Magesa, Emmanuel Katongole or Mercy Amba Oduyoye (that latter might be considered in the ‘feminist’ framework, even if she does not name herself in that way) represent that trend. The Kenyan Jesse Mukambi considers himself as the standard-bearer of a new trend identified as “Theology of Reconstruction,” but, in my opinion, that is more a development of the theology of liberation.

In this section, I have shown how Christianity is flourishing in the Congo-Zaire. I have given various figures testifying how Christian faith has grown and still is growing fast in that country. Going beyond the figures, I have also shown the vitality of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire, considering the lively way liturgical celebrations are held, and the rich theological activity developed. This was a presentation of the first image associated with the Congo-Zaire today, the “crowded churches” as said earlier. In the following section, I will explore the second image, the “empty stomachs,” this is to say the Congo-Zaire of death, oppression, poverty.

2.2. Congo-Zaire: A Poor Country that Continues to Grow Poor

2.2.1. *Poverty, a Multifaceted Notion*

Prior to the exploration of the reality of poverty in Africa, it might be useful to answer the question “what is poverty?” or rather “what do I mean by poverty in this essay?” The notion of poverty is very complex, as it entails various dimensions: social, economic, political, moral, spiritual, etc. To deal with that complexity, it is important to consider categorizing types of poverty. Reflecting on that issue, Anglican British theologian John Stott, looks at the people living poverty, the poor, and establishes three categories: “the indigent poor, the oppressed poor and the humble poor.”³⁴ The “indigent poor” are those deprived of the basic necessities of life. This is an economical approach to poverty. The “oppressed poor,” Stott writes, are the “powerless victims of human injustice.”³⁵ This can be designated as a sociological approach. Finally, the “humble poor” are the people “who acknowledge their helplessness and look to God alone for salvation.”³⁶ In this essay, I am not interested in the latter category, which upholds the Christian notion of “spiritual poverty,” understood as a value of detachment or being free from certain ties. I will deal more with the first two aspects: poverty as “indigence” and “oppression.”

Poverty as Indigence

Lack of adequate income

The category of indigence corresponds to poverty understood as “deprivation from the basics”: food, shelter, clothing, safe drinking-water, sanitation, etc.³⁷ Generally those basics are related with the notion of “income.” The usual definition of poverty is therefore “a lack of adequate

³⁴ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christian Today: A Major Appraisal of Contemporary Social and Moral Questions* (Marshall: Pickering, 1984), 216.

³⁵ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christian Today*, 216.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Constance Bansikiza, *Responding to Poverty in Africa* (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Publications, 2007), 19.

income to provide the basic requirements of sufficient food and adequate shelter to sustain physical life.”³⁸ The reference for this “income poverty” is “subsisting on one U.S. dollar or less per day.”³⁹ That reference is called the “poverty line.” However, income is not enough to define poverty, given that it may hide other important variables like illiteracy, illness, social exclusion (such as gender or race based exclusion). Also, the minimum income indispensable to avoid social estrangement is not necessarily the same, depending on communities and contexts.

Deprivation of capabilities

Hence, Indian economist and Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, suggested that poverty should be understood as “the deprivation of basic capabilities, rather than merely a lowness of incomes.”⁴⁰ This approach goes beyond income, incorporating cultural poverty and taking into account the exclusion of individuals from “opportunities and choices most basic to human development to lead a long, healthy, creative life, to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect.”⁴¹ The genuine approach of Sen establishes a link between “poverty-indigence” and “poverty-oppression.”

Poverty as Oppression

Indeed, the deprivation of capabilities reflects “the hideous social crises of our time.”⁴² The poor are those deprived of their capabilities because of the structures of the society. They are victims of every kind of injustices.

Related to “poverty-oppression” is the concept of “anthropological poverty” dear to Engelbert Mveng, Jesuit theologian from Cameroon. He writes, “There is a type of poverty that I

³⁸ Barbara Bailey, “Feminization of Poverty Across Pan-African Societies” in *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives*, ed. Peter J. Paris (Durham: Duke University press, 2009), 40.

³⁹ Bailey, “Feminization of Poverty Across Pan-African Societies,” 40.

⁴⁰ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 87.

⁴¹ Bailey, 43.

⁴² Jacob Olupona, “Understanding Poverty and its Alleviation in Africa and the African Diaspora” in *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives*, ed. Peter J. Paris (Durham: Duke University press, 2009), x.

call, ‘anthropological poverty.’ It consists in despoiling human beings not only of what they have, but of everything that constitutes their being and essence – their identity, history, ethnic roots, language, culture, faith, creativity, dignity, pride, ambitions, right to speak.”⁴³ This notion of “anthropological poverty” will prove useful in the exploration of poverty in the Congo-Zaire.

2.2.2. Poverty in the Congo-Zaire

2.2.2.1. Poverty in the Congo-Zaire: The Facts

In the first part of this chapter, I have shown the abundant natural resources available to the Congo-Zaire. In spite of all these resources, the country is dramatically poor, among the poorest of the African continent and of the world. In 2015, it was ranked 178th out of 186 countries in terms of HDI, the *Human Development Indicator* created by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to assess poverty, taking into account life expectancy at birth, education and the gross national income per capita. This indicator is built on basis of Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach that we already talked about. It confirms that the Congo-Zaire is poor, not only in terms of gross national income per capita, but also in terms of access to education, and life expectancy at birth, which supposes access to health and food security. In the Congo-Zaire, infant and maternal mortality are very high: above 100 deaths per 1,000 live births.⁴⁴

The 8 *millennium development goals* can help grasp to what extent the Congo-Zaire is poor. These are the goals: eradicate extreme hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, develop a global

⁴³ Engelbert Mveng, “Third World Theology. What Theology? What Third World?” in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology* (New Delhi: EATWOT, 1981), 220.

⁴⁴ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *Millennium Development Goals Report 2015* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: UNECA, 2015), 26.

partnership for development. In fact, those goals just show what the Congo-Zaire is suffering from: hunger and malnutrition; limited access to education and poor quality of the offered education; injustice and violence against women; high child mortality; very poor access to healthcare and sanitation, especially for maternal health; increase of diseases such as malaria, or HIV/AIDS; destruction of the environment; and lack of global partnership.

This essay is not the place to detail all those problems, but rather to reflect on the relationship between that poverty and the Christian flourishing. However, looking at the causes of poverty in the Congo-Zaire will provide us with some elements in order to understand the paradox we are dealing with.

2.2.2.2. [Poverty in the Congo-Zaire: The Causes](#)

In many respects, what scholars say about the causes of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa (that they simply designate as Africa) in general is also valid for the Congo-Zaire. I will thus freely apply some arguments on the cause of poverty in Africa to the case of the Congo-Zaire. To be more systematic, I will classify the causes of poverty under two groups: the anthropological causes and the structural causes.

Anthropological Causes

I call “anthropological causes” those related to the psychological and mental alienation that the Congolese people have been subjected to.

Engelbert Mveng is among the greatest scholars who analyzed that aspect of poverty. He sadly notes that the African continent “was enslaved for centuries and sold by auction in all the markets of the world, then exploited, colonized and subjected to a system of the *tabula rasa* that

aimed at the systematic destruction of its personality.”⁴⁵ Peter Kanyandago holds the same argument as he writes, “the African has been hurt and humiliated in what constitutes his/her world and system of values, especially his/her symbolic structure. This has led to psychological and social alienation expressed in all forms of self-denial by Africans as they express and live hatred for what is African because this is perceived as primitive and backward.”⁴⁶

There lie the deepest roots of poverty in Africa, and in the Congo-Zaire. Indeed, since its first contact with Europe, the history of Africa, is made of oppression and exploitation: four centuries of slavery trade (from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century) and two centuries of colonization (the nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

This had disastrous consequences for the African people. Elizabeth Amoah accurately analyzes that reality as she writes,

“European contact with Africa brought in a new set of economic, social, religious, and political structures. These new systems introduced new market approaches that were dictated by Europeans. They brought in values that viewed material things as more valuable than human beings. In fact, they viewed Africans as commodities, as evidenced in the slave trade. Again, the trend toward competition for individual wealth, acquisitiveness, and consumerism ignored the traditional African spirit of communal concern for the need of all.”⁴⁷

Viewed as “commodities,” Africans were sold as mere merchandises. Will the consequences of slavery and colonization be enough assessed one day? Jean-Marc Ela makes a bitter observation,

⁴⁵ Mveng, Engelbert, “Christianity and the Religious Culture of Africa” in *African Challenge*, ed. Kenneth Best (Nairobi: Transafrica Publishers, 1975), 17.

⁴⁶ Peter Kanyandago, “Rich but Rendered Poor: a Christian Response to the Paradox of Poverty in Africa,” in *The Cries of the Poor in Africa: Questions and Responses for African Christianity*, ed. Peter Kanyandago (Kisubi, Uganda: Marianum Publishing, 2002), 50.

⁴⁷ Amoah, “African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty,” in *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives*, ed. Peter J. Paris (Durham: Duke University press, 2009), 125.

“Ravaged by the trafficking of ebony, African societies have been deranged and marked by lasting precariousness. On a daily basis, through the representations, attitudes and reflexes rooted in the social, cultural and historical imagination, in the relations between African peoples and other contemporary societies, we find the mark of centuries of contempt.”⁴⁸

Slavery left indelible marks in the memory and the psychology of the African people, and their descendants, in the continent as well as those in the diaspora. They were dispossessed from their identity, and deeply wounded in their being. The Congolese did not escape that psychological wounds. After slavery, followed colonization. That also was an experience of annihilation and anthropological impoverishment. Furthermore, colonization set and left political and economic structures that contributed and still contributes to poverty in the Congo-Zaire.

Structural Causes: Political and Economic Structures of Predation and Repression

In 1885, “this vast country, more than 80 times size of little Belgium, was ceded by the major European powers to King Leopold II of the Belgian as a personal possession.”⁴⁹ And the King treated it “as if it were just a piece of uninhabited real estate to be disposed by its owner. In this he was not different from other European of his age, explorers, journalists, and empire-builders alike, who talked of Africa as if it were without Africans.”⁵⁰ He set political and economic structures oriented towards exploiting the country. The economy was based on exportations: grabbing resources from the country, taking them abroad for transformation, and then bringing them back for the people to buy them at a very high price.

⁴⁸ Jean-Marc Ela, *Repenser la théologie africaine : le Dieu qui libère* (Paris : Karthala, 2003), 85.

⁴⁹ Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila. A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 1.

⁵⁰ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost. A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1999), 101.

That economic system of predation was supported by structures of repression: a political system of personal rule backed by external powers, and supported by the use of violence against the people. For instance, to force the Congolese people to obey, the colonial administration appointed other Congolese as foremen, the *kapita*, who would exercise violence on their own brothers and sisters. Thus, Leopold II “created a class of foremen from among the conquered, like the *kapos* in the Nazi concentration camps and the *predurki* in the Soviets gulag.”⁵¹ The Belgian government, that took over King Leopold II, kept the same political and economic structures oriented towards exploiting the country.

Was there any change after the proclamation of the independence in 1960? Obviously no. “The formal independence of the young African states is just a mystification, a simple masking of Africa’s actual dependence,” Jean-Marc Ela writes.⁵² And Katongole goes on the same line underlining that “in those African countries where independence had just been declared, what was achieved was a mere cosmetic ‘change of guards’ that happened only at the top with African petty bourgeois nationalists replacing white colonialists.”⁵³

Similarly, in the Congo-Zaire, the new leaders just took the costume of the former colonizers, using the same method, and perpetuating the same system of predation and oppression. After colonization, and succession of governments, “the Congo still operates by the same law of plunder and greed. Actors change but the script seems to be unchanged. The recent fighting in eastern Congo, which has left over 3.8 million dead and many more homeless, only indicates its escalation and democratization.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Hochschild, 122.

⁵² Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 56.

⁵³ Katongole, 56.

⁵⁴ Katongole, 15.

Likewise, “the system of personal rule with external backing established under the Leopoldian regime has been replicated in post-colonial Congo by Mobutu and Kabila, both whom rose to power with foreign support.”⁵⁵ And the current regime is not different.

The Congo-Zaire also keeps the same economic system based almost exclusively on the exportation of resources. It remained an economic system of “picking up” as Ndaywel⁵⁶ calls it, “picking up ivory, rubber, palm oil, coffee and cotton; picking up copper, tin, cobalt, uranium, diamond, up to the most recent one in the Kivu, cassiterite, coltan, gold and diamond.”⁵⁷

The political and economic structures of exploitation and oppression led to violence. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the coast, because of the slavery trade, then in the regions of the Congo forest, because of the need for ivory and rubber. Now in the eastern part of the country because of the mineral resources. And that violence creates more poverty, thus leading to a vicious circle of poverty.

In sum, the causes of poverty in the Congo-Zaire are both anthropological and structural. Anthropologically, most Congolese, like most Africans, “are not entirely liberated from their colonial past or from certain complexes deriving therefrom.”⁵⁸ Thus, they remain vulnerable and poor. Structurally, the Congo-Zaire still functions following the economic and political model of predation and repression invented by the colonizers to impoverish and control the people. Now, what is the relation between that increasing poverty and the growth of faith in the Congo-Zaire?

⁵⁵ Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2.

⁵⁶ Ndaywel è Nziem, *L'invention du Congo contemporain*, 168.

⁵⁷ « Cueillette de l'ivoire, du caoutchouc, de l'huile de palme, du café et du coton ; cueillette du cuivre, de l'étain, du cobalt, de l'uranium, du diamant, jusqu'à celle toute récente au Kivu, de la cassitérite, du coltan, de l'or et du diamant ». The translation in English is mine.

⁵⁸ Ela, *African Cry*, 62.

3. Understanding the Paradox and Looking for a Way Out

The previous section has shown that in the Congo-Zaire, Christian faith and Poverty are growing simultaneously. If one considers that Christian faith has nothing to do with the people's conditions of life, then there is no point in questioning those two elements. Then there is no paradox. But is Christian faith not supposed to have a positive impact on the people's conditions of life?

Religion and Social Context

In his masterpiece, *Sociology of Religion*, Max Weber shows how religions are the result of a social construction. He demonstrates that “gods and demons, like vocabularies and languages, have been directly influenced by the economic situations of different peoples.”⁵⁹ The best and simplest example for understanding how culture and social context shape religion, is the fact that the elevation of a particular god to primacy was generally the consequence of a particular socio-economic importance. For instance, Weber writes, “among groups that raise cattle, this god is most frequently conceived of as the lord of reproduction.”⁶⁰ In the same way, deities like “Mother Earth” were born from a certain importance of agriculture. In the area of politics, the cultural shape of religion is even more obvious. As Weber goes on, “the formation of a political association entails subordination to a tribal god.”⁶¹ Religion was related to a political association. And “the stranger was not only a political, but also a religious alien.”⁶² As it clearly appears in the history of the

⁵⁹ Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 13.

⁶⁰ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, 13.

⁶¹ Weber, 16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 17.

Jewish people, “political and military conquest entailed the victory of the stronger god over the weaker god of the vanquished group.”⁶³

This is to say that religion is always dependent on a certain socio-cultural background, and shaped in a socio-cultural system. In other words, religion has an important social dimension. Aylward Shorter rightly shows the consequence of that assertion, as he writes, “if religion is a human phenomenon, or human activity, it must affect, and be affected by, culture.”⁶⁴ In the same way, for me, if religion is a human phenomenon, or human activity, it must affect, and be affected by the daily reality lived by people. Hence, in a context of “poverty-indigence” and “poverty-oppression,” Christian faith must affect and be affected by that “poverty-indigence” and that “poverty-oppression.”

“Being affected” is not the term used by the Second Vatican Council. But it is the idea behind the powerful statement of the Fathers of the Council in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.”⁶⁵ These words, I think, are to be understood beyond simply feelings of sympathy, or compassion. Rather, they should drive Christianity and Christians to be on the side of the poor, and to struggle with them to bring a change in the structures of the society. This is to say that Christianity flourishing simultaneously with poverty, as just shown in Africa, is a paradox.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), 5.

⁶⁵ Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*, # 1.

How to resolve that paradox? My argument is that the way out of the paradox passes through a thorough exploration of its sources. What are the sources of the paradox of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire? I find three sources.

The first one is given by this question of Jesse Mugambi reflecting on the situation of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa, “How could it be that people who continue to call upon God most reverently are the ones God seems to neglect most vehemently? Could it be that the Gospel has reached African people as very bad news?”⁶⁶ The same question is valid for the Congo-Zaire. Could it be that the Gospel has reached the people of the Congo-Zaire as bad news? To answer that question, I need to analyze the way Christianity reached the Congo-Zaire. There lies the first source of the paradox.

The second source is found in the relations between Christianity in the Congo-Zaire and the poor. What kind of relations did Christianity establish with the poor when it reached the Congo-Zaire? What kind of relations does Christianity in the Congo-Zaire keep today with the poor? How did and does Christianity in the Congo-Zaire consider itself and act toward the poor?

Finally, the third source resides in the concept of salvation promoted by Christianity in the Congo-Zaire, in its beginnings, and today. Indeed, salvation is at the heart of Christian faith. Christianity is about salvation. Therefore, the approach to salvation determines the way people relate to earthly realities, and to the various problems they may face, including oppression and poverty.

In the next chapter, I am exploring in details these three sources.

⁶⁶ Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 44.

Chapter Two: Exploring the Sources of the Paradox

1. The Ambiguities of the Arrival of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire

In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II following the paths of most historians, recalls that the Gospel reached Africa in three different phases. He writes, “The first centuries of Christianity saw the evangelization of Egypt and North Africa. A second phase, involving the parts of the continent south of the Sahara, took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A third phase, marked by an extraordinary missionary effort, began in the nineteenth century.”⁶⁷

The Congo received the Gospel during the second and third phases. It is important to realize that those two phases correspond to two dramatic events in the history of the Congo-Zaire: the first phase corresponds to the centuries of slavery-trade, while the second phase matches the era of colonization. Congolese historian Isidore Ndaywel describes each one these two phases, usually known as the first and the second evangelization of the Congo-Zaire.

1.1. Missionary Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom: Hand in Hand with Slave Traders

The first phase of the evangelization of the Congo-Zaire began in the late fifteenth century. It touched the western coastal region, the Atlantic coast, of the then Kingdom of Kongo, and “began with the arrival of the first group of Portuguese missionaries in the great caravan of the technicians of modernity generously sent by Dom Manuel of Portugal to his Kongo counterpart.”⁶⁸ This is confirmed by John Baur, a famous Swiss church historian, who writes that “among all African kingdoms, the Kongo has by far the longest Christian tradition, beginning at the end of the

⁶⁷ John Paul II, Pope, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n°30.

⁶⁸ Ndaywel, *L'invention du Congo contemporain*, 222.

fifteen century (1491) and continuing, though like a river in the desert ground growing thinner and thinner into the middle of the nineteenth century.”⁶⁹ Hence, that first evangelization lasted for more than three centuries and ended in 1835, when the last capuchin missionary left the Kongo. What was the context of that first evangelization, and what were its characteristics and aftermath?

1.1.1. Context: A Prosperous Kingdom Led to Its Decline

According to Kongo oral traditions, the Kingdom was founded in the late fourteenth century by Ntinu Wene Nimi a Lukeni, and located in a large region comprising the nowadays North of Angola, the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), the west of Congo-Zaire, and the South of Gabon. Ntinu Wene is known in the Kongo tradition as a great Conqueror and was given the title *Mwene Kongo* or *Mani Kongo*, translated as “Lord of Conquest.”⁷⁰ His capital city was Mbanza-Kongo. He developed a well-organized trade with neighboring kingdoms. The economy was based on agriculture, trading of ivory, copper objects, potteries, etc. In the socio-cultural point of view, the Kongo people consider the world as composed by *Nzambi Mpungu* (the Supreme Being), the ancestors and the living beings (humans, animals, and “things.”)⁷¹ All are related and interact. The common denominator among them is life. The *Mani Kongo* had a very important role in politics as well as in religion.⁷² In fact, in the Kongo worldview, as in most Black African peoples’ worldview, there was “no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, the religious and non-religious, the spiritual and the material areas of life.”⁷³ This will be a big issue between the Kongo and the Portuguese who brought Christianity to them.

⁶⁹ John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa. An African Church History* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998), 55.

⁷⁰ John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, 55.

⁷¹ Kabolo Iko Kabwita, *Le Royaume Kongo et la mission catholique.1750-1838. Du déclin à l’extinction* (Paris : Karthala, 2004), 46.

⁷² Kabolo Iko Kabwita, *Le Royaume Kongo et la mission catholique*, 46.

⁷³ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1999), 2.

1.1.2. Christianity in the Kongo Kingdom: A Political and Economic Issue

In 1482, when the first Portuguese arrived at the mouth of the great river (the word for river is *Nzadi* in Kikongo language, which was misspelt as *Zaire* by the Portuguese) the Kongo was ruled by Ntinu Wene's eighth successor, Nzinga Nkuwu.⁷⁴ After misunderstandings, and negotiations, official relationships were established between the two kingdoms and their rulers. An abundant correspondence between the two kings attests that.

Then four Kongo people were taken to Portugal, where they were treated with great honor by the Portuguese King João II. When they came back to the Kongo, they were full of enthusiasm and praised the greatness of Portugal. Hence, Nzinga Nkuwu sent other young men for training and asked for missionaries. And "a few weeks after the arrival of the missionaries, King Nzinga Nkuwu and his eldest son Mvemba Nzinga, were baptized on 3 May 1491."⁷⁵ Nzinga Nkuwu took the name of Dom João (adapted as *Ndo Nzwau* in Kikongo language) and Mvemba Nzinga became Dom Afonso (*Ndo Mfunso*). The King being converted, his people followed, and by that very fact, the country became officially Christian. Pope Paul VI will later on refer to the Congo-Zaire as "the eldest son of the Church in Black Africa."⁷⁶

Now, why did the King and his son ask for baptism? In a letter dated from 1512, Afonso affirms that it was "a unique and special favor given to us by the Holy Trinity."⁷⁷ But researchers think that the King and his son were impressed by the military power and the technology of the Portuguese. Thus, their "conversion" was motivated by the conviction that the God of the

⁷⁴ Baur, 56.

⁷⁵ Baur, 57.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Portuguese was the source of those power and technology. From there, they found it worthwhile to adopt their religion, in order to access the same power and technology.⁷⁸

In any case, it seems that very fast, many – beginning with *Ndo Nzwau* – were disappointed for not getting all the expected advantages, and decided to return to their original religion. However, few people – among whom *Ndo Mfunso*, the prince – held on the new faith. Thus, political antagonism was the first fruit of Christianity in the Kingdom of the Kongo. After the death of *Ndo Nzwau*, the electoral council of the elders appointed as King, his other son, Mpanzu Nzinga. This latter was in favor of the tradition, and against the new religion. Hence, the Portuguese helped his brother, *Ndo Mfunso*, to fight the new King. Eventually, in 1506, Mpanzu Nzinga was killed, and *Ndo Mfunso* took over and began to organize a “Christian Kingdom” with the support of the Portuguese. But actually, it was Portugal that took over... until *Ndo Mfunso* realized that he was not free and that the Portuguese were behaving as conquerors.

The Aborted Dream of a Kongo Church

The King *Ndo Mfunso* was disappointed, not only because of the Portuguese’s will to control his Kingdom, but also because of the immoral life of the Portuguese missionaries. Baur writes, “although they were regular canons, bound to common life and poverty, they at once started to live in separate houses, which they filled with slave girls. They became a great scandal, and people laughed at the King, saying that ‘everything was a lie.’”⁷⁹ The various letters of *Ndo Mfunso* to the King of Portugal remained unsuccessful to change the situation. Therefore, he began to dream about Kongo Church, with Kongo clergy and hierarchy. Not only did he dream, but he worked to realize his dream, sending young relatives to Lisbon to be trained as priests and

⁷⁸ Kabolo, 49.

⁷⁹ Baur, 59.

religious. His son, Kinu a Mvemba *Ndo Ndiki* (Dom Henrique) was appointed bishop by Pope Leo X and ordained in 1521, at the age of 26 in spite of the decision of the Lateran Council held in 1515 stating that the youngest age to be appointed bishop should be 30.⁸⁰ Dom Henrique became thus the first Black African bishop.

In spite of all the efforts of *Ndo Mfunso* to create a viable version of Christianity in the Kongo, the dream remained a dream. Sometimes, this *Kongo Christianity* is accused of having been a *syncretism*. But is there such a thing like pure Christian faith? Every inculturation of the Gospel should thus be called syncretism. Anyway, people allege that this “syncretism” is why that *Kongo Christianity* died out. I rather think that the reason is to be found in the political and economic area: “The Portuguese tried unsuccessfully to use the Church for political ends.”⁸¹ Thus, Portugal deprived the Church of Kongo from priests, but the strong Kongo laity compensated that situation. They maintained their Church alive. Eventually, Portuguese managed to overthrow the King of Kongo, and associated with invaders and slave traders to weaken and finally destroy the Kingdom. What was the relation between the Missionary Christianity and Slave traders?

Hand in Hand with Slave Traders

As I have just shown, missionary Christianity in the Kongo was deeply linked with political interests. On the side of the Kongo, many thought that adopting Christianity will give them the same power as the Portuguese, so as to remain partners on equal basis. On the side of the Portuguese, having a Christian Kongo king would allow them to take control over the country and its wealth, particularly mine resources. Beside mining, the Portuguese found out what a big benefit they could get from trading slaves. They thus began to hunt slaves and take them to be sold to the

⁸⁰ Baur, 59.

⁸¹ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), 145.

Americas. In the beginning, the Kongo kings cooperated, but later on they opposed the Portuguese on that shameful trade. These opposed interests led to open conflicts between the two kingdoms. War broke, but the Portuguese had the military and technological advantage. In addition, they exploited the ambitions of some Kongo dignitaries, and signed deals with enemies of the Mani Kongo to have him overthrown and the Kingdom enter a cycle of wars. The best-known battle took place in Ambuila, in 1665, it “marked the end of the ancient glories of the Kingdom of Kongo and initiated a 40-year period of chaos”⁸² with the defeat and death of Kongo king *Ndo Ntoni I*.

In that context, Portuguese missionaries were at the service and on the side of the Portuguese King. They worked for the political and economic interests of their country. Baur mentions that four Jesuits were sent to the Kongo, in 1548, with the mission of building a seminary. They began their apostolate with enthusiasm and even produced the first catechism in Kikongo language. But the Mani Kongo *Diogo I* was wary of them because “they kept too close contact with the Portuguese empire of trade (...) and they even participated in the slave-trade.”⁸³ Therefore, the Mani Kongo expelled them.

In sum, missionary Christianity in the Kingdom of Kongo arrived and walked hand in hand with the conquerors, and slave-traders. Missionaries wanted to serve faithfully the interests of the system that produced, trained and sent them. They chose to stand on the side of the rich and the powerful. So, Christian faith grew in numbers, spread in various places and activities, but the people were enslaved, oppressed, impoverished. There began the paradox. A century later, during the second evangelization, slave-traders were replaced by colonizers. And the Gospel still remained “bad news” for the people.

⁸² Baur, 65.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 62.

1.2. Missionary Christianity in the Congo-Zaire: Hand in Hand with Colonizers

The second evangelization of the Congo-Zaire officially started in 1883, when the Spiritans Missionaries established the mission of Boma, in the south west of the Congo-Zaire.⁸⁴ In the same period, arrived the first Protestant missionaries from the *Baptist Missionary Society* and the *Livingston Inland Mission*. This second evangelization was more successful than the first one, and spread into the whole territory of the Congo. Two major factors contributed to that expansion. First of all, the competition between Catholic missionaries and Protestant missionaries, and secondly, the will to counteract the expansion of Islam in the country. What was the context of that second evangelization, and what were its characteristics and aftermath?

1.2.1. Context: From Personal Property of the Belgian King to Belgian Colony

When the Berlin Conference of 1885 divided Africa among European countries, the Congo-Zaire was given not to Belgium, but to King Leopold II of Belgium, as a “personal property” which he named the “Independent State of the Congo.” Actually, in 1877, the British journalist and explorer, Henri-Morton Stanley, launched an appeal to European governments to occupy the Congo basin “for its development.” The British government was not interested. Thus, Leopold II, “an ambitious ruler with a small kingdom [who] was convinced that Belgium needed a colony”⁸⁵ seized the opportunity. As he failed to get the Belgian parliament and the public opinion support his dream, he decided to move forward alone, and acquired the Congo as a private property. He founded the *Association Internationale Africaine* (AIA) officially for the “exploration, civilization and suppression of the slave-trade between the Zambezi and the Sudan.”⁸⁶ In 1884, the AIA became *Association Internationale du Congo* (AIC) and when the

⁸⁴ Ndaywel, *L'invention du Congo contemporain*, 222.

⁸⁵ Baur, 215.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Berlin conference established the frontiers of the various African countries, Leopold II realized his ambition and became the head of a new state, 80 times larger than Belgium, which he called *Etat Indépendant du Congo* (Congo Free State), EIC. The reign of Leopold II over the EIC was made of horrors, atrocities and abuse on the population in the Congo. For instance, the army, known as “Force Publique” was used to enforce the traders’ demands, “whipping and shooting at will, and cutting off the right hand of any person who had not provided sufficient booty.”⁸⁷ That provoked international diplomatic pressure, and the Belgian parliament had to take control of the country. In 1908, the EIC became the “Belgian Congo,” the colony of Belgium, a country that was “anything but eager to take control of the Congo,”⁸⁸ and “wholly unprepared to govern the Congo.”⁸⁹ Belgium had no experience of colonization, the Congo was too vast and diverse in terms of tribes, ethnics, and the people were exhausted after the bloody reign of Leopold II. Anyhow, Belgium had to continue the work of exploitation, from 1908 to 1960.

But what was the situation of the Congolese people before and during this time of “foreign control”? Edgerton testifies, “the earliest European explorers, traders, and missionaries found thriving societies, people by well-fed, contented, hardworking and creative people.”⁹⁰ This is not simply embellishing the past, but reality, as Edgerton continues, “The Congo was no paradise, but most of its people led prosperous lives, helped by religious rituals and strong family ties.”⁹¹ The inhabitants were part of several kingdoms, dedicated to farming, making various artistic works in wood, metal. Beyond their diversity, they were very close through their languages and their

⁸⁷ Edgerton, 11.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 155

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

religious practices. And precisely, Leopold II and, later on, the Belgians used religion to control the country.

1.2.2. Christianity in the EIC and Belgian Congo: A Political and Economic Issue

“In no other African colony were the Catholic missions as intimately bound to the state as in the Congo,” Baur writes.⁹² This relationship was motivated by political and economic reasons. Missionaries, concerned with “saving the souls” of the Congolese, needed the protection and financial support of the King and the colonial government. To foster their hold on the Congolese, Leopold II, and the colonial government needed the influence of the missionaries.

For instance, to move on his work of conquest, exploration and exploitation of the Congo, Leopold II required financial and political support from Belgium. To get such support, he decided to attract more Belgian missionaries, offering them “plots of arable land, free and forever.”⁹³ The strategy worked. Missionaries found the conditions appealing, and flew all over the country: “As early as the 1890s, the Jesuits established themselves at Kwango (south-west), the Trappists were next at Coquilathville (north-west), the Sacred Heart priests at Stanleyville (north-east) the Premonstratensians at Buta (north-east), and the Redemptorist at Matadi (west). In the same years, the first Sisters’ congregations arrived: Sisters of Charity of Gand, Sisters of Our Lady of Namur, and the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.”⁹⁴

There were also Protestant missionaries. But most of them were not Belgian, and thus they were beyond the king’s authority. Catholic missionaries, on the contrary, were mostly Belgian and “loyal supporters of the king and his regime.”⁹⁵ The king subsidized the Catholics and even

⁹² Baur, 336.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 219.

⁹⁵ Hochschild, 134.

managed to have priests sent in places where he wanted to strengthen his influence.⁹⁶ In 1905, a report containing serious accusations against Leopold II was published, with information sent by Protestant missionaries, about the atrocities committed in the Congo. Protestant Bishops called for the Pope to intervene. The King sought support from Rome, in offering lands and material advantages to the Catholic missions. That is part of the *Convention of 26 May 1906* signed between the Holy See and the EIC.⁹⁷

Besides, Leopold II also urged missionaries to create and run colonies for children, in order to train future soldiers for his army and ensure his handhold on the country. Hochschild quotes a letter from the king, dated April 27, 1890,

I believe we must set up three children's colonies. One in the Upper Congo near the equator, specifically military, with clergy for religious instruction. One at Leopoldville under clergy with a soldier for military training. One at Boma like that at Leo. The aim of these colonies is above all to furnish us with soldiers. We have to build three barracks, each capable of housing 1500 children.⁹⁸

Those children were supposed to be orphans, but this actually meant that their parents were killed by the army, the *Force Publique*. Furthermore, the conditions of life in the colonies were not the best: children were traumatized, malnourished, and exposed to various diseases. The journey from their villages to the colonies was a deadly trial that only very few could survive. Hochschild quotes a Catholic religious sister, superior of a colony of girls in 1895 saying, "several of the little girls were so sickly on their arrival that our good sisters couldn't save them, but all had the happiness of receiving Holy Baptism; they are now little angels in Heaven who are praying for our great king."⁹⁹ That is both a shocking spiritualization of the suffering of those poor people,

⁹⁶ Hochschild, 134.

⁹⁷ Baur, 219.

⁹⁸ Hochschild, 133.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

and a disgusting canonization of their torturer, Leopold II. It shows how “Christian missionary expansion was subordinated to secular forces.”¹⁰⁰ In that sense, missionary Christianity contributed to the exploitation of the Congo-Zaire and its impoverishment.

Having looked at the conditions around the first and second evangelization of the Congo-Zaire, one might wonder why people not only converted to that new religion, but also why they transmitted it to their children. The motivations certainly vary depending on individuals. As seen previously, the very first to get converted, were attracted by the way of being of the bearers of the Gospel, or at least their appearance. The Kongo people wanted to be like those foreigners, to have the same power and technology as them. And, they thought, embracing the religion of the Portuguese could provide them with the same greater power and advanced technology as the Portuguese. Many of those who converted during the second evangelization, this is to say during colonization, were also motivated by the desire of being like the “White.” In any case, it seems to me, that those people were aspiring to better conditions of life, and thought that Christianity will help them achieve that aspiration. In other words, behind every conversion, there is a genuine desire for something better in one’s life. The question is: how did/does Christianity deal with that aspiration for a better life? This is to say, what were/are the relations between Christianity and the Poor in the Congo-Zaire? Here, I will analyze those relations, first of all in the “missionary Christianity” – this is Christianity of the first and second evangelization; and then in the “post-independence Christianity” – this is Christianity from the independence up to now. I choose the qualifier “post-independence” to avoid any confusion with “post-colonial,” which is an important and complex concept, with which I will deal later on.

¹⁰⁰ Mugambi, 38.

2. The Ambiguous Relationships Between Christianity and the Poor in the Congo-Zaire

2.1. Missionary Christianity and the Poor in the Kongo Kingdom and the Congo

2.1.1. Siding with the Powerful to Help the Poor?

My previous analysis shows that, by and large, missionaries generally sided with the “powerful,” who were the European governments, the conquerors, the slave-traders, and the colonizers. They did not side with the poor Kongo/Congolese. However, I need to acknowledge that many had a real motivation to “help the poor,” those poor being the Black people. And at the same time, they needed to remain in the good graces of the powerful. For their mission of evangelization, they needed support from the powerful, their own government, and other powerful people, as we saw in the case of King Leopold II. Moreover, those powerful were their own people, their own government. Hence, missionaries tried to navigate in that ambiguous situation. The outcome of it is that generally, History remembers missionaries as having taken side for the powerful, and not the poor.

2.1.2. Evangelization or Colonization?

Most missionaries were taught that Black people were savages, a sort of sub-category of humanity that they needed to “civilize.” Thus, they came to the Kongo/Congo-Zaire, “eager to evangelize, to fight polygamy and to impart to Africans a Victorian sense of sin.”¹⁰¹ Even though we want to give credit on the missionaries for some “pure intention,” as writes Congolese theologian Kabasele-Lumbala, “no matter the goodwill of the missionaries and their pure intentions, often the confusion between evangelizing and civilizing ended by drowning missionary

¹⁰¹ Hochschild, 172.

action in that of colonization.”¹⁰² As a result, missionaries despised and dismissed the indigenous people’s traditions and way of life, as being primitive. They treated their religion as “superstition” and contemptuously called it “animism.”

This somehow resonates with the experience of Jon Sobrino as a young missionary in El Salvador, in Latin America, in the 1970s, as he himself writes, “My vision of my task as a priest was a traditional one: I would help the Salvadorans replace their popular “superstitious” religiosity with a more sophisticated kind.”¹⁰³ Likewise, most missionaries in the Kongo/Congo-Zaire did not bother themselves in trying to understand the way of life of the people they met, or trying to dialogue with it. Thus, they damaged the self-esteem of the Kongo/Congolese people. And the poor Congolese ended up despising their own way of life, and preferring the Western culture.

A good illustration of the damaging effects of the biased image of Black people can be found in the myth of the “descendants of Cham,” the cursed son of Noah (Genesis 9: 18-27), and its consequences. Missionaries taught their Congolese faithful, in the churches as well as at school, that Black people were properly cursed and condemned to be inferior to other “races.” This remained in the Congolese minds for decades, and some still keep it, considering themselves as unable to perform anything good because they were cursed. Ndaywel recounts that “in May 1980, during the visit of John Paul II to Zaire, a delegation of Congolese notables made the request to the Pope, asking him if he could not, as Vicar of Christ, lift Cham’s curse, that continues to weigh on the peoples of Black Africa.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² François Kabasele-Lumbala, *Le Christianisme et l’Afrique, une chance réciproque* (Paris : Karthala, 1993), 50.

¹⁰³ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy. Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*. (Maryknol, New York : Orbis Books, 1994), 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ndaywel, 151.

The action of the missionaries contributed to making the poor more submissive, more easily inclined to accept the rule of the West as “normal” and even “salvific.” Hence, the poor could not think about revolting against what was the will of God. The only thing they could hope for was “eternal salvation” of their soul. For that they had to pray and receive the sacraments. This doctrine served both the interests of the Colonial government, the interests of the economic operators, and the interests of the Church: to have submissive subjects. Ndaywel forged the term “colonial trinity” to designate that particular relation between colonial administration, business enterprises and Catholic missions, to the detriment of the Poor.

2.1.3. Works of Charity: Shades and Lights

Am I not being unfair? Do I forget that missionaries fought poverty? They set up medical facilities. They built schools and colonies for the children. They trained farmers to new agricultural practices. They spent their life serving the poor, and some even died of bad conditions of life, and hard work. It would be really unfair not to consider these works of charity. They were admirable, and deserve respect. They helped to “make” a certain type of person: the Black African, the Congolese. And that person was the indigent-poor and oppressed-poor. What went wrong with the works of charity? Actually, what was their purpose? I should deal with that question later on. Nonetheless, I can without doubt affirm right now that they were more directed to the mission of “civilizing” Black people. And I have just shown all the ambiguous presuppositions and implications of that mission of “civilization.”

Besides, they served more to the fulfilment of the law of charity at the level of the individuals, but they did not deal with the deep causes of poverty; nor did they question the political and economic structures set by Leopold II, as I described earlier, structures aiming at exploiting and oppressing the people. They were obeying a strict logic: as they were trying to implant the

Western system, they could not at the same time be challenging it. Generally, the works of charity were in line with a very paternalistic approach, that cannot help the individual to raise and develop as an autonomous agent.

2.2. Post-Independence Christianity and the Poor in the Congo-Zaire

The temptation is always too big to throw on the back of colonization all the mistakes of Christianity. Well aware of that temptation, Congolese theologian Kä Mana asks, “in what ways are we better than those who preceded us in the work of mission and evangelization? How are our behaviors, mentalities and practices different from the ambiguity of our missionary past?”¹⁰⁵

After the independence, Christianity was faced with several challenges. The Catholic church particularly – by and large, the main Christian church in the Congo-Zaire – was attacked on various sides, verbally as well as physically, as having been the servant of colonization. An anti-clerical, and anti-Catholic movement rose all over the country. Thus, the Congolese members of the clergy had therefore the difficult task of reconciling Christianity with the Congolese people, with the poor, their own people. At that time “a critical evaluation of the past, and a search for new pastoral forms”¹⁰⁶ took place. The *theology of Inculturation* which I talked about earlier was in line with this critical evaluation of the past, and an attempt to re-appropriate the African way of life. A crucial question was how to reorganize the relationship with the poor and the powerful, especially now that the powerful were no longer – at least apparently – the Western, but other Congolese.

¹⁰⁵ Kä Mana, *La nouvelle évangélisation en Afrique* (Yaoundé : Editions Clé, 2000), 56.

¹⁰⁶ Baur, 339.

2.2.1. Conflict with Dictators: in the Name of the Poor, or of the Institutions of the Church?

Since the independence, in 1960, the Catholic Church in the Congo has very often been in conflict with the Government. Most of the times, the conflict took the face of two major characters: one from the Church, and the other from the Government. For instance, in the 1970s, the Archbishop of Kinshasa, Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula, opposed President Mobutu Sese Seko, and was obliged to live in exile some times. Among other points of discord, there was Mobutu's decisions to nationalize the institutions of the Church, and to forbid the "Christian" names. If this latter decision could sound in agreement with the *Inculturation* movement supported by Malula, the Cardinal found that it was against the people's freedom to bear the name of their choice. Malula was convinced that *inculturation* was a way of giving back to the Congolese her/his dignity as a human person, and acknowledge the value of their particular way of life. But, this could occur only in the strict respect of the freedom of the person. Mobutu also wanted to control the Church, certainly trying to recreate the "colonial trinity": politics, economy and religion. As the Catholic Church resisted. This led to a trial of strength. But most of the people were looking at that situation as a conflict between two "powers" about their own interests. The poor did not take part into the conflict. They bowed before the military power of Mobutu, and nobody demonstrated to support the Cardinal. Did the poor feel that the Church was on their side? It was not clear at the time. And it still is not clear today, from the point of view of the poor, whether Christianity is trying to save Christianity or to save the poor. If the Church struggles to show that she is not on the side of the powerful, she still has a long way to go to show that she is on the side of the poor.

2.2.2. "Voice of the Voiceless" or "Church in the Middle of the Village"?

The Catholic Church in the Congo struggles between two identities. Sometimes, she is referred to as the "voice of the voiceless" and some other times as "the Church in the middle of

the village.” The first designation refers to the multiple apostolic letters, public declarations and interventions of the Bishops, to denounce abuses, or to warn in front of dangers. For instance, these last ten years, the Congolese Bishops’ Conference (CENCO) has issued many letters on the respect of human rights, on the need for fair elections, or again calling for the people’s responsibility to defend their country. As illustration, here are the titles of some of the CENCO’s letters: *Non au blocage! (Stop the Blocking)*. This letter was issued to urge politicians to implement the agreement signed in December 2016 between the government and the opposition for a period of transition leading to free elections. *Faudrait-il encore que le sang coule ? (Do We Need More Bloodshed?)* That one talks about the tensions observed throughout the country in 2015, as the elections were coming near. *Peuple Congolais, lève-toi et sauve ta patrie! (Congolese People, Wake Up and Save Your Country!)* That declaration was the Church’s reaction to the chronic armed violence in the eastern part of the Congo-Zaire.

Throughout these letters and declarations, generally very concise, translated in the four national languages, and made accessible to everyone, the Church clearly commits herself to the poor. She is criticized for that by the powerful who consider that her mission is not to take side, but to remain “in the middle of the village.” This means that the Church should always try to bring people together, organize mediations, call for peace, not condemn anyone, etc. This position is more comfortable, than trying to be the “voice of the voiceless.” It generally avoids much problems with the powerful – who are very grateful in that case. But neutrality in a context of injustice is equivalent to being accomplice. In the Congo-Zaire, these last decades, millions of people have been killed, and thousands are still being killed. Women are being raped. Kids are being enrolled in rebel armies and trained to kill, or sacrificed as human shield. Workers are being deprived of

their wage. Do they need the “voice of the voiceless” or “the church in the middle of the village”? Or none of them? I will reflect on that question in the third chapter of this essay.

2.2.3. Works of Social Justice: Struggling with Paternalism

Another important element as regard to the relation between post-independence Christianity and the poor in the Congo-Zaire, is “Social Justice.” Indeed, Christianity in the Congo-Zaire after independence, continued the works of charity initiated by missionaries. But it brought a change on the emphasis: “social justice” took over “charity.” There is a tremendous difference between the two perspectives. The latter one focuses on the individual and tries to offer relief to her/his pain; while the former looks at the structures and tries to provide paths to remove the roots of the problems. However, they are not mutually exclusive, and should not be opposed. What is needed is a certain balance. Not to focus on charity and forget social justice, and vice versa. And that remains a big challenge for Christianity in the Congo-Zaire. The temptation of charity and paternalism is big.

2.3. Lessons from the Relationship between Christianity and the Poor

What can I draw from this survey of the relationships between Christianity and the Poor in the Congo-Zaire?

First of all, Christianity in the Congo-Zaire has never clearly taken side for the poor. There has certainly been some good will, but no strong implementation. This is certainly due to the fact that Christianity was and still is too much tied to political and economic powers that are not ready to accept a change of attitude. In addition, that has never been officially proclaimed as the main concern of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire, even though important actions have been taken against

poverty... generally with the support of the powerful. And the Church does not seem ready to take the risk of shaking up the structures that support her.

Secondly, Christianity tried to take advantage of the economic system in order to help the poor. This ended up with some works of charity, which most of the times contribute to heal the consequences, but does not deal with causes of poverty. In addition, many of the actions taken have not really contributed to make the poor more autonomous, as agents, but rather tend to infantilize them, making them people who always wait to receive some alms from benefactors.

Thirdly, through Inculturation, Christianity tried to give back to the poor their values, which were despised by the conquerors and colonizers. But this seems to have been limited to external, folkloric aspects. Moreover, the poor themselves seem not convinced of the value of their way of life. This is to say how damaged was and still is their self-esteem and self-image.

Reflecting on these various elements, I realize how they contribute to the paradox. Churches are crowded because – that is not the only reason, but it is an important one – people are convinced that they can get help from the God of Christianity. In other words, they expect Christianity to help them deal with their problems – which I consider as various types of poverty. And they acknowledge that Christianity is willing to help. But at the same time, poverty grows, because the help provided deals with the surface of the problem, and not enough with its deep roots.

Another reason why churches are so crowded is the message. People are attracted by the message proclaimed, hoping to find solution to their problems in listening to and applying that message. And in Christianity that message is about salvation. People want to be saved. And Christianity in Africa has emphasized two ambiguous approach to salvation: salvation as “eternal

life” and salvation as “prosperity.” A third approach has, from time to time, been touched, but not deepened enough nor brought as the hallmark of Christianity in Africa: the approach of salvation as liberation. This also explains why Christianity grows and yet poverty does not decline.

3. The Ambiguous Concepts of Salvation Promoted in the Congo-Zaire

3.1. Salvation as Eternal Life

3.1.1. *Eternal Life, at the Heart of the Mainline Christianity Message*

What is it to be “saved”? The mainline Christian churches (Catholic and Protestant churches) have generally emphasized one answer: to have eternal life. Indeed, the “Good News” brought by missionaries to Africa was about eternal life: after this earthly life, believers will enjoy eternal life in “Heaven.” As a matter of consequence, this earthly life is not so important, and the goods of the earth are to be despised. In that perspective, Christianity appears as “a religion whose proper area of competency is ‘pastoral’ and ‘spiritual,’ that is clearly distinct from the determination of the field of politics. It was this version of Christianity that the missionaries accepted and worked out of, and into which they evangelized their African converts.”¹⁰⁷ And that version of Christianity still endures in the Congo-Zaire.

3.1.2. *Eternal Life, at the Heart of Christian Faith*

“Eternal life” is not an invention of the missionaries. It is within the core of Christian faith. The mission of Jesus Christ in the Gospel is summarized in terms of “eternal life.” The Gospel of John is particularly full of interesting references to eternal life. For instances, Jesus talking to Nicodemus, gives him a lecture on eternal life,

¹⁰⁷ Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 19.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that God sent God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. (John 3:14-16)

Some verses further, Jesus introduces himself to the Samaritan Woman as the one who gives living water. "Whoever drinks the water I shall give him will never thirst. The water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:14)

Also, in the famous discourse of the *Bread of Life*, Jesus calls again the people to believe in him in order to have "eternal life": "For that is the will of the Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him on the last day." (John 6:40). And again, "I am the living bread... Whoever eats this bread will live forever." (John 6: 51). According to John, these words were very subversive and shocking for Jesus' auditors, and thus many left him. But those words also gave us this beautiful profession of faith of Simon Peter, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68).

So, what is that "eternal life"? The response of Jesus in John 17:3 seems to refer to the spiritual dimension: "Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one you sent, Jesus Christ." Obviously, that "know you God, and Jesus Christ" is not simply intellectual or academic knowledge, but a deep inner experience of union with God, and Jesus Christ. Based on that, and on the many various references to "eternal life," one may easily limit eternal life to that spiritual dimension. And the reference to the "last day" or "resurrection of the dead" easily leads to push "eternal life" in the framework of eschatology.

However, throughout the Gospel, through many signs, Jesus shows great concern about the current life, the material life, this earthly life: he heals the sick, nourishes the hungry, raises the

dead up, forgives the sinners and reinserts them in the society. That concern tells us that there is a deep link between both the eschatological and the historical life; the spiritual and the earthly.

It is amazing that the Risen Jesus does not refer to “eternal life.” Rather, he is concerned about the earthly life of his friends. In John 21, for instance, Jesus himself cooks some fish for his disciples to eat. In my view, Jesus wanted to show that “eternal life” has to be anticipated in this earthly life.

3.1.3. Assessment: When Eschatology Hinders the Present Reality

It is much easier to look at “eternal life” as the life that believers will be granted at the end of History, in the *eschaton*. And this has been the main trend in Christianity for centuries. That is the trend that was transmitted to Christianity in the Congo-Zaire. This conception of salvation is very comfortable and helps to escape the earthly concerns, projecting joy, happiness and life in the *eschaton*, in the world to come. In that perspectives, Christians should not try to change the structures of the present world, as they are promised a better world, a better life in Heaven. They are foreigners in that world, they “do not have a lasting city here, but seek the one that is to come.” (Hebrew 13:14). They should thus “seek what is above, where Christ is seated; think of what is above, not of what is on earth.” (Colossians 3:1-5).

That perspective was very convenient for slave traders, colonizers, dictators, and it is very interesting for all those who have power, be it political, economic or spiritual power. It keeps their power secure. It guarantees that the poor will accept whatever they do. Given that approach to salvation, in front of abuses from the powerful against the poor, when they were not themselves directly involved in the oppression and exploitation of the poor, “missionaries found themselves

acting as mere observers on the battlefield.”¹⁰⁸ That is why the religious sisters in charge of the colonies of kids set by Leopold II, would assist to the passion of these little children, with no other resources than baptizing them. It just as if “given the context, all Christianity could offer was a limited way of salvation: prayer for the king and heavenly reward for the little angels.”¹⁰⁹

People are attracted by this approach to salvation, as it helps them “give” their sorrows and concerns to Jesus, and “await the blessed hope and the coming of the Kingdom.” The poor rush therefore to the churches, embracing Jesus, closing their eyes to the causes of their poverty... enjoying that opium that takes them to some seventh heaven.

3.2. Salvation as Prosperity

3.2.1. *Prosperity: Being Freed from “Evil Spirits of Poverty”*

Since the 1990s, the vision of salvation as “prosperity” is very popular and successful in the Congo-Zaire. It shakes the mainline churches (Catholic and Protestant), seduces many Christians, and is generally carried out by the “new religious movements.” These are called like that “to distinguish them from the earlier phenomenon of the African Instituted Churches,”¹¹⁰ churches established by Africans prophets, mostly between the 1900s and the 1960s, in the eve of the African independences. The “new religious movements” on the contrary are more recent, and find their source out of Africa, even though they use many features of African worldview. They are known all over the world as “Neo-Pentecostal churches,” “Evangelical churches,” “revival churches,” and more specifically in the Congo-Zaire as “églises de réveil.” That is the term I will use in this essay to designate them.

¹⁰⁸ Katongole, 18.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹¹⁰ Aylward Shorter and Joseph Njiru, *New Religious Movements in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 14.

The “églises de réveil” are part of the third wave of Pentecostalism. In fact, Pentecostalism started in the United States of America, in 1900, with the ministry of Charles Parham.¹¹¹ Its aim was “to continue the work of the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost, restoring the gifts of the Spirit promised in the latter days.”¹¹² It spread quickly all over the world and reached Africa in the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Congo-Zaire has known three waves of Pentecostalism. The first one, the “classical Pentecostalism,” is generally close to the traditional Protestant churches in its teaching, apart from the emphasis on the “baptism in the Spirit” and the “gift of tongues.” The second wave is made of “Charismatic movements” of the 1960s, which originated in the traditional Protestant and Catholic churches. The third wave, the “Neo-Pentecostalism,” came in the 1980s and 1990s. It comprises the Evangelical churches, among which the Congolese “églises de réveil.” Päivi Hasu, a Finnish researcher in Economics and Development, rightly underlines the distinctive characteristic of this third wave, as he writes, “the Neo-Pentecostalism, puts more emphasis on the miracles of prosperity and the divine healing.”¹¹³

Indeed, the “églises de réveil” base their ministry on the struggle against the evil spirits which prevent the faithful to reach welfare, prosperity. Like the Pentecostal churches, they focus on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, mainly prophecy and speaking in tongues, and they spend a lot of time casting out evil spirits, in a very spectacular way.¹¹⁴ For many Congolese, as for many other people in Sub-Saharan Africa, “evil spirits are an ever-present reality.”¹¹⁵ Life events find

¹¹¹ Shorter and Njiru, *New Religious Movements in Africa*, 18.

¹¹² Shorter and Njiru, 19.

¹¹³ Päivi Hasu, “Prosperity Gospels and Enchanted Worldviews,” in *Pentecostalism and Development. Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, ed. Dena Freeman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 69.

¹¹⁴ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology. The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 148.

¹¹⁵ Shorter and Njiru, 31.

explanations in reference to the world of the spirits. For most of the Congolese, bad event occurs because of an “evil spirit.” The fact that this aspect – largely neglected or despised by the traditional Christian Churches – is being dealt with by the “églises de réveil,” attracts large crowds, including members of the Catholic, Protestant, and African Instituted Churches.

In a context of abject poverty and suffering, like the Congolese one, where each one is in search of relief, of solution to her/his problems. In a situation of deep distress, instinctively, everyone thinks about and looks for her/his personal, individual salvation, her/his personal welfare. Thus, the “églises de réveil” present themselves as casting out the evil spirits responsible for people’s misfortunes. They have established a wide range of evil spirits for each kind of misfortune: the “evil spirit of celibacy” that prevent the person to get married, the “evil spirit of unemployment” that prevent the person to get a job, the “evil spirit of poverty” that prevent the person to get rich, etc. Prosperity is about being freed from those various evil spirits and leading a wealthy life. Prosperity is the proof of God’s blessing, and the proof of salvation.

The example of the leaders of these movements (they give themselves titles such as pastors, prophets, bishops, doctors, etc.) is meant to be a source of motivation for the people. Indeed, most of the leaders of the “églises de réveil” are very rich (or become rich very fast) individually. They easily become businesswomen and businessmen, owning jewels, cars, buildings, TV stations, banks, etc. They are considered as blessed people, and the faithful see in them models of prosperity to follow. Their prosperity confirms their salvation. In sum, for the “églises de réveil,” Salvation is about Prosperity. That “gospel” tempts even some ministers of the Catholic Church in the Congo-Zaire.

3.2.2. *Gospel of Prosperity*

The teaching of the “Prosperity Gospel” is basically that “God wants God’s people to be wealthy; and poverty is an indication of personal sin.”¹¹⁶ To support that view, the “églises de réveil” abundantly refer to passages from the Hebrew Bible. “They give prominence to figures who were favored by God, the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”¹¹⁷ Besides, they cherish heroes and successful leaders such as David and Samuel, and also people who were saved from a threat, through a special intervention of God, like the companions of Daniel: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; or again Joshua, Gideon, etc. And, to establish a deep link between those biblical figures and the faithful today, most of the members of these churches, in the Congo-Zaire, choose to name their children after those heroes, symbol of success and prosperity.

Some other favorite texts are those referring to tithes. Leviticus 27:30, for instance, is used to stress the sacredness of the tithe: “All tithes of the land, whether in grain from the fields or in fruit from the trees, belong to the Lord; they are sacred to the Lord.” Malachi 3:10 particularly is highly valued as the oath taken by God to ensure the prosperity of the person who gives tithe: “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, and see if I do not open the floodgates of heaven for you, and pour down upon you blessing without measure!”

In Kinshasa, most of the leaders of the “églises de réveil” convince their members to “sow in the garden of God,” which means to donate big amounts of money to the church, in order to “reap” God’s blessings, and be freed from the evil spirits that prevent them to prosper. This is

¹¹⁶ Shorter and Njiru, 32.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

obviously a biased interpretation of 2 Corinthians 9 where Paul encourages the Corinthians to be generous. The verses 6 to 8 are emphasized:

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. (NRSV)

Thus, people are urged to give, and to give abundantly in order to receive God's abundant blessings. Mottos like this one are more than clear: "tithing will open your financial heaven."¹¹⁸

3.2.3. Assessment: Personal Prosperity and Collective Poverty?

In the perspective of the "églises de réveil," salvation is personal, individual. The community comes in mostly as the locus where one can witness about her/his salvation and inspire others to be also saved. Salvation occurs at the precise moment the individual has accepted Jesus as personal savior. From that moment on, the person is born again, and prosperity follows as sign that a new life has begun.

I acknowledge some sort of individual empowerment lying behind this approach to salvation. Mottos like "I am a winner," or "To the Lord and God's beloved belong Gold and every wealth" can create motivation in the individual, and increase self-confidence. However, too much emphasis on the personal dimension, overshadows the community. As Päivi Hasu writes, "the new churches encourage accumulation, individualism, entrepreneurship and showing off one's

¹¹⁸ Shorter and Njiru, 32.

wealth.”¹¹⁹ But at the community level, is poverty being alleviated? Looking at the evolution of the situation in the Congo-Kinshasa, the answer is obvious: no.

The approach of salvation as prosperity is terribly reductive and biased. On the one hand, the needs of the African are not limited to the prosperity of a few individual. On the other hand, this message of individual prosperity is not reflected on the ground with the prosperity of a large number of individuals, nor the well-being of the community. As a matter of consequence, churches are crowded, yet poverty continues to grow.

The two concepts of salvation we have just analyzed, with their ambiguity, are dominant in Christianity in the Congo-Zaire. There is a third approach which Christianity in the Congo-Zaire sometimes refers to, but that has not been explored or implemented enough. It is the approach to salvation as liberation.

3.3. Salvation as Liberation

3.3.1. *Looking at Latin America Liberation Theology*

“Liberation Theology was set in motion in the 1960s by ethical indignation (true sacred wrath of the prophets) in the face of the dire poverty of the masses, especially in the Third World.”¹²⁰ Actually, the phrase “Liberation Theology” was first used only in 1971, in the book *A Theology of Liberation* by Peruvian Dominican, Gustavo Gutiérrez. Its starting point was the concrete situation of the people in Latin America in the years 1960s: economic poverty, lack of education, social crisis, dictatorship, injustice and violence.

¹¹⁹ Päivi Hasu, “Prosperity Gospels and Enchanted Worldviews,” 72.

¹²⁰ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 107.

This context can be enlarged to include the struggles of the colonized countries for their independence. Without doubt, the *Cold War*, which began in 1947, after the Second World War, and ended in 1991 with the fall of the Berlin wall and the dismantlement of the USSR (Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics), played an important role in the emergence of the Liberation Theology.

But prior to the use of the term “Liberation Theology,” its bases were already laid in Vatican II. *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) shows concern for the social, economic and political situation of the people in the world, as it claims, “The joys and the hopes, the grieves and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grieves and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”¹²¹ In the same perspective, Pope Paul VI, in 1967, published an Encyclical on *the Development of Peoples*, in which he affirms, “The hungry nations of the world cry out to the peoples blessed with abundance and the Church.”¹²² Thereby, the Pope was calling for justice among nations, justice among the peoples, justice for the hungry and the marginalized. He also set up the Pontifical Commission *Justice and Peace* in order “to encourage to social justice among nations and to offer to less developed nations the means whereby they can further their own progress.”¹²³

In 1968, the bishops of Latin America, gathered in Medellin, Colombia, approached “the figure of Christ from a concern with salvation... [expressed] in terms of Liberation.”¹²⁴ Indeed, in their final documents on *Justice*, the Latin American Bishops declare:

It is the same God who, in the fullness of time, sends his Son so that, having been made flesh, he might come to free all human beings from all the servitudes to which they had

¹²¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no1.

¹²² Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, no 3.

¹²³ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, no 5.

¹²⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 17.

been condemned by sin, ignorance, hunger, poverty and oppression: in a word, by the injustice and hatred which have their origin in human selfishness.¹²⁵

A decade later on, in Puebla, Mexico, the Bishops of Latin America called again for a concern for the poor and the oppressed to whom Christ is identified, and prompted the Church for conversion. There, for the first time was used the phrase “preferential option for the poor,”¹²⁶ as they stated “We affirm the need for the conversion of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, with a view to their integral liberation.”¹²⁷

All this had a great impact on the church in several Latin American countries: Brazil, Peru, Colombia, El Salvador, etc. In these various countries, masses of peoples were being weighed down by dictatorship, and huge poverty. Many people in the Church, especially religious and priests, decided to commit themselves for the liberation of the oppressed and the poor, sometimes at the cost of their own lives. Some of the best-known cases are those of the Jesuit Rutilio Grande, assassinated in 1977, his friend Bishop Oscar Romero murdered three years later, and six other Jesuits massacred in 1989, along with their maid and her daughter, at UCA (University of Central America), in El Salvador.

Liberation Theologians also underwent hardships within the Church. They have been criticized, some have been silenced or condemned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) because of the danger of reducing salvation to the material aspect, the temporal and political, and because of suspicions of sympathy with Marxist approaches. In order to ensure the orthodoxy of this particular theology, the CDF published, in 1984, a document entitled *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* in which it is strongly criticizes “some” (sic) to

¹²⁵ CELAM, Final Documents “Justice” (Medellin, Colombia, 1968,) no 4.

¹²⁶ CELAM, Documento de Puebla, (Puebla, Mexico, 1979) n°1134.

¹²⁷ “Afirmamos la necesidad de conversión de toda la Iglesia para una opción preferencial por los pobres, con miras a su liberación integral.” (The English translation is mine).

whom “it even seems that the necessary struggle for human justice and freedom in the economic and political sense constitutes the whole essence of salvation. For them, the gospel is reduced to a purely earthly gospel.”¹²⁸ The danger is real, and the balance is difficult to find. However, it is not enough to criticize or to warn against any danger. There is a need to offer an alternative. Thus, two years later, the CDF issued another document entitled *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*. In that instruction, the CDF acknowledged that “a theology of freedom and liberation is something needed by the times in which we are living.”¹²⁹ It then referred to the social doctrine of the Church emphasizing solidarity among people and nations, and the educational task, “which is a condition for the success of all other”¹³⁰ liberative tasks. So, the CDF did not reject the insight of liberation but basically reminded the necessity of not limiting salvation to “a purely earthly plan of liberation.”¹³¹

How thus does Liberation Theology understand salvation? As said above, the heart of Liberation Theology is the preferential option for the poor. I will discuss that crucial notion later on. For the time being, I would like to underline that unlike other theological and soteriological models, Liberation Theology begins with the lived experience, the concrete situations of poverty and oppression. From the empirical reality follows a theological praxis and reflection. Indeed, Liberation Theology is both theory and praxis.

The masterwork of Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, is the first systematic presentation of Liberation Theology. Its aim seems to defend the praxis of Liberation Theologians against certain voices within and outside the Church. The author

¹²⁸ CDF, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’” (Rome, 1984), n. 6.4.

¹²⁹ CDF, “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation” (Rome, 1986), n. 98.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, n.99.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, n.98.

sometimes refers to “those who reduce the work of salvation, those who limit it to the religious sphere, those who refuse to see that the salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all alienation.”¹³² This statement summarizes perfectly its approach to salvation.

Liberation Theology leans on a very broad understanding of the universal salvific will of God. Salvation is universal means that it “embraces all persons and the whole person.”¹³³ And the condition of that salvation is basically to open oneself to God and to others. In other words, salvation is the “communion of human beings with God and among themselves.”¹³⁴

Seen like that, salvation is not merely “something to come.” The brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff highlight that “Salvation is not actualized only in the last moment of one’s life, or only in eternity. It is anticipated. The human being must enter upon a whole salvation process, a process that begins on earth and ends in eternity.”¹³⁵ This process embraces the total reality of human beings today, “transforms it and leads it to its fullness in Christ,” as Gustavo Gutiérrez writes.¹³⁶

In fact, Christ came to bring freedom from various evils: moral, physical and social. And he identified himself with the poor and the oppressed, for whom he really showed a *preferential option*. Therefore, Salvation should be understood as Liberation from the various evils people are facing today in any society. There is a radical incompatibility between the Evangelical demands and an unjust and alienating society. Alienation is sin, a break with God and other human beings.

¹³² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 104.

¹³³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 97.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹³⁵ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 18.

¹³⁶ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 85.

Liberation calls for the transformation today of the structures backing or causing alienation, oppression, poverty, in brief sin.

It might be good to balance what has just been said about the “here and now” dimension of Liberation. Indeed, the early Liberation Theologians faced the accusation of reducing salvation to the temporal. Thus, they had to make it clear for themselves: historical liberation is not the whole of salvation. The brothers Boff write, “salvation transcends every historical liberation, for death has not yet been vanquished: we have not yet come within God, nor have we been totally assumed by God, nor has all creation been transfigured.”¹³⁷ This nuance is crucial for a good understanding of the relation between salvation and liberation. Salvation includes historical liberations, but it also transcends them. In other words, Salvation begins here and now in the historical liberations, but will fully be achieved in the *Eschaton*. This sounds like the “*already but not yet*” of the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus. From here, we can briefly survey the main foundations of Liberation Theology in the Scriptures.

3.3.2. *Biblical Outlook*

Liberation Theologians read the Scriptures as a Story of Liberation from all kinds of oppression and alienation. “From its point of departure, the anguish of the poor of this world, the whole biblical message emerges as a proclamation of liberation.”¹³⁸

One of the main texts of reference is Luke 4:18-19, the words of the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed by Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazareth, in the beginning of his ministry:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
Because he has anointed me
to bring the good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*

¹³⁷ L. Boff and C. Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 59.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

*and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed, go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Liberation Theology draws on this text to underline first of all that the mission of the Messiah is a mission of Liberation of the poor and the oppressed. And the followers of the Messiah, this is to say Christians, are heirs of the same mission. As the text goes on, verses 20-21 say that Jesus finished the reading, rolled the scroll, gave it back, sat down and then simply concluded: “*These words are fulfilled today.*” This is also crucial for Liberation Theology, as it underlines that the liberation announced by the Prophet Isaiah is effective today, *here and now*. At the same time, this historical liberation prefigures the eschatology, the final victory of Christ over all oppression, the various texts on healing the sick or feeding the hungry enter in the same perspective: they are performed in history; but they also announce the Kingdom to come. They work as signs because they do not change all of reality.

Another major biblical paradigm for the Liberation model is the Exodus, Liberation of Israel from the servitude in Egypt. God is seen as the One who comes to free God's people. But God the Liberator asks human beings, Moses and Aaron, to work out this liberation. Gustavo Gutiérrez helps us go further in the understanding of God's self-disclosure and the Exodus, as he writes,

The full significance of God's action in history is understood only when it is put in its eschatological perspective; similarly, the revelation of the final meaning of history gives value to the present. The self-communication of God points towards the future, and, at the same time this promise and Good News reveal humanity to itself and widen the perspective of its historical commitment here and now.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 95.

Prophetic texts are also abundantly referred to, as they are oriented toward the future while concerned with the present. Among them, Gustavo Gutiérrez analyzes particularly the *Second Isaiah* who brings beautiful insight as he associates God's work of Creation (*Barra*) and God's work of Salvation (*Go'el*).

In passages like “*But now this is the word of the Lord, your creator: I have paid your ransom.*” (Isaiah 43:1) or “*For your husband is your maker, whose name is the Lord of Hosts, your ransomer is the Holy One of Israel.*” (Isaiah 54:5) or again in the Psalms 74, 89 and 93, YHWH is at the same time Creator and Savior, because “creation itself is a saving action.”¹⁴⁰ In fact, Creation is oriented toward Salvation. This again underlines that Salvation, as “*thing to come*,” is already present “*here and now*” in the very act of Creation.

3.3.3. *Inculturation: the “Original Sin” of Congolese Church and Theologians.*

As said earlier, Congolese Church and theologians chose to emphasize the theme of *inculturation*. I have shown how successful they were in liturgy, creating and implementing the *Zairian rite*, or in ecclesiology with the concept of “church as God's family,” or Christology with the figure of “Christ the Ancestor,” etc. And they did it so well, that they neglected the theme of *liberation*. That, I think, was their original sin.

I strongly believe that the call for *inculturation* should go far beyond the simple reference to “cultural” aspects such as art, dance, songs, language, etc. It ought to include the social context. Therefore, there is a need to evangelize the socio-political and economic context. This in return, will enrich the embodied Gospel. In other words, *inculturation* is not antiquarianism, but liberation. Actually, liberation and culture are deeply linked. “Inculturation must be placed in the

¹⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 87.

context of liberation and integral human development.”¹⁴¹ This is the mission of Christ as He Himself describes it in the already quoted passage of Luke 4: 18-19.

As stated by the Accra Pan-African Conference of the Third World Theologians, in 1977: “Oppression is not found only in culture, but also in political and economic structures, and the dominant mass media.”¹⁴² Therefore, political and economic areas should be part of the process of *inculturation*. Otherwise, this latter will remain incomplete. As argues Jean-Marc Ela, “if the search for an African Christianity is to reach Africans in the unity of their soul and body, it must be based in the concreteness of life where the violence of misery is as fatal as any form of cultural alienation.”¹⁴³ Mutatis mutandis, I may use the same terms for the Congolese Christianity.

South-African Theologian, Albert Nolan, quoted by Jean Marc Ela, criticizes a certain model of the Church in Africa in general, as a *church of sacramental consumption*:

“the Church is a kind of Agency that provides the people with sacraments and other ritual services... These products are regarded as necessary in order for people to obtain the salvation or health of their souls. The Church is this supermarket of the spiritual or sacramental... Those who want something else, such as justice, liberation or peace, look elsewhere. We need to change this type of Church. We need to turn to the type of churches described in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, a church concerned with the salvation and total liberation of the person, of society and of the material universe.”¹⁴⁴

The theologian is not criticizing *liturgy* or the *inculturation of liturgy*, but rather, the overemphasis on this aspect to the detriment of the concern about political and economic issues.

¹⁴¹ Shorter, 248.

¹⁴² Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 126.

¹⁴³ Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 119.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

These latter are also part of the needs of people. The overemphasis on Liturgy sometimes turns to ritualism and mere folklore.

In accord with Jean Marc Ela, I consider that the emphasis should lay more on the relation and effect of the sacraments on people's life, rather than the rites. Taking the example of the Eucharist, the Cameroonian theologian puts a very pertinent question: "How can we truly be nourished by the body of Jesus Christ while a minority is satiated, and yet each year millions of people have no food and face an empty granary."¹⁴⁵ It seems clear to me that the inculturation of the Liturgy of Eucharist cannot ignore the reality of hunger people are facing. This aspect has to be taken into account; otherwise, the celebration will be totally disconnected from people's life. In other words, an inculturation of the Liturgy of the Eucharist should not be limited to the rites, words, songs and dances. It should rather be extended to the "bread" people are supposed to break every day, and the conditions in which they work to earn this bread. During the 41st Eucharistic Congress held at Philadelphia, USA, in 1976, the then Superior General of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe brought the concept of "social dimension of the Eucharist."¹⁴⁶ He recalled that it would be a utopia to pretend to unite people around the "spiritual bread" as long as they are not united around the "material bread," or they even lack this material bread. This is to say how deeply related to the concrete and actual life of people, the Eucharist should be. As Eboussi Boulaga nicely puts it, "the matter of the sacrament is human life as such."¹⁴⁷ Indeed, more than simply dealing with rituals, the inculturation of the Eucharist should be a call to look at the economic and political situation in which people are living, and find ways of turning that situation into a celebration. Inculturation is

¹⁴⁵ Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 87.

¹⁴⁶ Pedro Arrupe, *L'espérance ne trompe pas* (Paris : le Centurion, 1981), 179.

¹⁴⁷ Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 202.

more than simply trying to collect practices and symbols from the past. It has to deal with the actual and present context of the people.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the sources of the paradox of growing Christianity and growing Poverty in the Congo-Zaire. That analysis showed how the ambiguities of missionary Christianity contributed to both increasing the number of Christians, and impoverishing them. It stood more on the side of the powerful, preached a Gospel focused on the spiritual salvation of the people; and worse it rejected the Congolese people's traditional way of life, thus destroying their identity.

The same analysis showed how Christianity in the Congo-Zaire struggled to find a different path after the proclamation of the independence, trying to integrate some aspects of the rich Congolese culture into the received Christianity. I have described and praised the genius and the beauty of Inculturation movements, in various aspects of the life of Christianity in the Congo-Zaire. Indeed, for decades, now, Theological reflection, as well as liturgical practice, or religious life, have been marked with the seal of Inculturation. I have likewise explained how hard Congolese Christianity tried to change the relationships with the poor. The Catholic Church particularly has been famous since the 1960s, speaking up on behalf of the poor, denouncing the injustice of the successive dictatorial powers, or leading mediations between political actors, in order to avoid social implosion or violence that would penalize more the poor. Besides, Christianity in the Congo-Zaire keeps on setting and running works of charity: health centers and social centers where orphans, poor women, unmarried mothers, street kids, abandoned elderly, are taken care of and/or educated. In addition, many schools and universities are run by Christian churches.

However, despite all these remarkable efforts and initiatives, Christianity in the Congo-Zaire still remains stuck in the colonial model, in many regards.

The relations of Christian churches' leaders with the powerful political and economic leaders remain ambiguous. In spite of their critiques against the powerful, most of the Congolese Christian leaders are deeply associated with the same powerful people. They are not free. Like most of the missionaries, during the first and second evangelization, they are trapped in political and financial interests that make them rely on the powerful. Furthermore, churches possess big holdings that they try to secure, and they cannot do so without the support of the powerful. As a matter of consequence, their relations with the poor are also ambiguous. Their actions in favor of the poor still keep a paternalistic side. The approach of salvation that they preach is also ambiguous. It is torn between the "eternal life" approach of the missionaries and the "prosperity" approach of the new religious movements. The former one focusses on the life to come, and easily leads to submission, and passivity; while the latter emphasizes the personal material success but neglects the collective dimension. In both cases, the result is an increase of the number of the Christian believers, but not a decline of poverty.

Given that reality, how can the paradox of Christianity and Poverty be resolved? In the next chapter, I argue that Christianity in the Congo-Zaire needs to move out of the colonial model, in order to get out of the paradox. It needs to move towards a Postcolonial Christianity.

Chapter 3. Way Out: Towards a Postcolonial Christianity Informed by the African way of Life and Rooted in the Preferential Option for the Poor

1. Towards a Postcolonial Christianity

1.1. Understanding Postcolonialism or Postcolonial Theories

I am not using the phrase “postcolonial” in the simple sense of chronologically situated after the period of colonization. I am using it in a more complex meaning, related to the burgeoning area of “postcolonialism” or “postcolonial theories.” I uphold the definition given by Angie Pears, who considers postcolonialism as “a whole set of theories, approaches and literary techniques which emerged in the 1980s as an identifiable and distinct group of methodologies concerned with understanding and analyzing different power relationships and power differentials in the world and with actively seeking to challenge such inequities.”¹⁴⁸

The movement started with the publication of the book *Orientalism* whose author, Edward Said, addresses the misrepresentation of the Orient by the Western colonizers. As Kwok Pui-lan, a standard-bearer of Postcolonial theory writes, “the book initiated colonial discourse studies by taking stocks of the myths, mind-set, scholarship, and institutional structures that have sustained Western hegemony.”¹⁴⁹ Hence, postcolonialism first appeared “in the academic discipline of English literature, and in particular of textual and discourse analysis.”¹⁵⁰ Following Edward Said, many other scholars, in various fields, started trying to comprehend “the impact of colonialism on contemporary socio-economic structures, cultural interpretation, and religious diversity.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 133.

¹⁴⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁵⁰ Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology*, 137.

¹⁵¹ Hille Haker, “Editorial: Postcolonial Theology” in *Concilium. International Journal of Theology* (n.2, June 2013), 7.

Indeed, colonialism has left deep marks on contemporary societies, and that in several different ways. The claimed independences of colonized nations seem not to have overcome colonialism. It did not die. It simply took a different form: neocolonialism, globalization, multinationals, etc.; and continues to rule the world, “controlling people, economies and cultural systems on a global level.”¹⁵² In that line, Robert Young, another standard-bearer of postcolonial theory, holds that the independences were “a relatively minor move from direct to indirect rule, a shift from colonial rule and domination to a position not so of much independence as of being in-dependence.”¹⁵³ And in fact, the situation has not changed. The former colonizers are still ruling. The former colonized people still depend the former colonizers for their survival. The situation is logical, given the main reason of the enterprise of colonization by Western countries: “to capture and exploit the resources”¹⁵⁴ of the colonized areas. Obviously, the colonizers began to depend on those resources, and thus say a system whereby the colonized would have no other choice for their survival than turning toward the colonizers to export their resources.

The work of Edward Said, and other postcolonial scholars, appealed to “Christian theologians and scholars of Christianity because it was the Christian ‘West’ that had constructed and promulgated the negative images”¹⁵⁵ of the colonized peoples. Indeed, biblical studies, religion, and theology played a major role in the elaboration of the narrative of imperialism. And, Kwok Pui-lan adds on a personal note, that she keeps thinking on “how the great theologians [that I have admired] were influenced or tainted by the colonialist ethos and mentality.”¹⁵⁶ Edward Said

¹⁵² Pears, 133.

¹⁵³ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁵⁴ Pears, 135.

¹⁵⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, 3.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

shows how Bible scholars like W.M.L Wette and Julius Welhausen constructed a “degenerating Judaism to be superseded and replaced by Christianity.”¹⁵⁷

1.2. Challenging Colonial Faces of Theology

Applied to the area of theology, postcolonial theories gave birth to postcolonial theology, which “analyzes the impact of colonialism on theology and theological concepts respectively.”¹⁵⁸

Postcolonial theologians consider themselves as part of liberation theology. The argument of Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera is very eloquent, as they write, “we persist within the force field of liberation theology. No political theology could ‘supersede’ (...) the historic work of liberation theology (...) but we seek fresh insight into emancipation.”¹⁵⁹ Those fresh insights reside in a permanent critique of the context. With Angie Pears, I can put this simply as follows: postcolonial theology may be considered as “a type of liberation theology, and also as a development of liberation theology.”¹⁶⁰ It draws from the insights of liberation theology. Like liberation theology, postcolonial theology finds its origin in the “informed and resourced resistance to the cultural, political and economic domination of indigenous peoples by those who invaded and conquered”¹⁶¹ their territories. Like liberation theology, postcolonial theology takes a contextual approach, “looking at the world not from above but from below.”¹⁶² Like liberation theology, it re-reads the Scriptures, emphasizing the God who sets the oppressed free. And scholars

¹⁵⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, 5.

¹⁵⁸ Haker, “Editorial: Postcolonial Theology,” 7.

¹⁵⁹ Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera, *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (Saint-Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁶⁰ Pears, 133.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁶² Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, 20.

like Kwok Pui-lan and Laura Donaldson¹⁶³ have been developing a feminist approach to postcolonial theology.

Besides, postcolonial theology can be seen as a “development of liberation theology” because, while making use of the insights of liberation, it also challenges liberation theologies and liberation movements. For instance, postcolonial theology criticizes the fact that most of the times a form of liberation has simply consisted in the replacement of one oppressive system by another.¹⁶⁴ This is not the true spirit of liberation. Postcolonial theology also calls liberation theology and itself, to a self-criticism, “because they themselves have arisen out of the situation that they are attempting to overcome they are inevitably shaped to some extent by the oppressive.”¹⁶⁵

This appeal for a permanent analysis of the context, and an auto-criticism are essential to postcolonial theology, as postcolonial theory calls “the postcolonial intellectuals” to be vigilant “about the deep-seated layers of colonialist patterns of thinking in the archaeological excavation of their minds.”¹⁶⁶ However, the field of postcolonial theology still is slow to develop, perhaps because of the contestation around the concept of postcolonialism itself.

¹⁶³ Together they edited a major work on *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁶⁴ Pears, 138.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, 3.

1.3. A Contested and Still Developing Concept

As just seen, postcolonial theories made impact on various fields. However, the concept remains contested and questioned. Kwok Pui-lan also clearly acknowledges that “the meaning of the term ‘postcolonial’ continues to be vigorously debated.”¹⁶⁷

First of all, the prefix “post,” might be understood as “after.” Therefore, can we really speak in terms of “postcolonialism” nowadays, given the reality of neocolonialism? Kwok Pui-lan refers to a caution from Edward Said himself, saying that “it might be premature to speak of postcolonialism, since colonialism is not over and has simply been superseded by neocolonialism.”¹⁶⁸

Secondly, for some critics, the term “postcolonial” can be applied to a huge variety of peoples, nations, and territories throughout space and time. Therefore, Kwok Pui-lan argues, there is a risk of “glossing over vast differences if the geographical and historical particularities of individual cases are overlooked.”¹⁶⁹ In other words, there is danger of forgetting the context, while trying to look at the global reality of colonization with the same lenses.

Pears goes in the same line, underlining that “homogenous representation of oppression whilst powerful, if it is not fully faithful to the situation, will only fall short of the aim of the original task and will in the end come back to plague the movement or the original concerns.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, 2.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Pears, 136.

1.4. Shaping Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire

Beyond all the complexity and controversies about the concept of postcolonialism, I find it worthwhile in the context of the Congo-Zaire. As said earlier, Christianity in the Congo-Zaire keeps on functioning according to the colonial model. Basically, that model was meant to convert people to the new religion, not to help them improve their conditions of life, not to fight poverty. And conversions aimed at controlling the people, making them useful to the colonial administration. The way out of the paradox we have been analyzing would thus consist in shaping a postcolonial Christianity that would address the shortcomings of the colonial Christianity. But how to shape that Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire?

First of all, by dealing with the heritage of the history of evangelization and its consequences. It is not about changing history, but being honest in acknowledging its effects that continue today, and trying to deal with them. If we cannot change the past, we can still change the consequences, fix the damages. And beyond the material damages, as seen, the most severe damages are related to the fact of despising the way of life of the Congolese people, and teaching or coercing them to reject it. This led to the anthropological poverty we explained in the first chapter. Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire should therefore be informed by the values of the way of life of the indigenous, the African way of life.

Secondly, in rethinking and reorganizing the relationships between Christianity and the poor. Those relationships should be rooted in a radical choice to be on the side of the poor, with the poor, to be one of them. This option is based on a more accurate understanding of salvation. A salvation not only oriented towards “eternal life,” or “union with God” in the *eschaton*, but historical salvation, starting in the earthly life, in the *hic et nunc*. A salvation that does not only

mean well-being of the individual, but also assuring the welfare of the community. The preferential option for the poor requires raising the awareness of the individual on their situation, working with them to implement their agency, to improve the structures of the society, and to take care of their environment. Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo should therefore be rooted in the preferential option for the poor.

2. Informed by the African Way of Life

As shown by and large in the first and second chapters, missionary Christianity seriously damaged the identity of the Congolese in rejecting their way of life, the African way of life. Christianity after the independence tried to retrieve some of the values of that African way of life, through the theology of inculturation. However, I think that there is still a long way to go.

2.1. The Characteristics of the African Way of Life

What does “African way of life” mean and what are its characteristics? Before answering that question, I need to explain why I am using the term “African way of life” instead of “Congolese way of life,” for instance, or even “Congolese culture.” In line with most of scholars, I acknowledge two major facts.

First of all, it is difficult to isolate the Congolese from other Africans (in fact, sub-Saharan Africans) when it comes to cultural elements. Everyone knows that the political map of Africa, meaning the current division in countries, does not correspond to particular cultural areas. It simply reflects some colonial interests. And the word *culture* “refers to the way of life of people, to their traditional behavior, in a broad sense, including their ideas, acts and artifacts.”¹⁷¹ Now, as Kenyan

¹⁷¹ William Bascom, ed., *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 1.

activist Wangari Maathai writes, “while most of us know what might constitute a French, Russian, Chinese, Japanese or Indian culture, it is impossible to speak meaningfully of a South African, Congolese, Kenyan, or Zambian culture.”¹⁷² Thus, when approaching the question of culture or religion, or identity, or worldview, scholars tend to avoid referring to the political division of countries in Africa.

Secondly, Scholars agree that African languages do not have such a word as “religion.” In the Lingala language from the Congo-Zaire, for instance, people will speak in terms of *ndenge na biso* (“our way”), *ezaleta ya biso* (“our way of being”), *bonkoko bwa biso* (“the way of our ancestors”), which scholars simply render as “our way of life.”

Hence, what scholars call *African religions*, this “sum total of beliefs, creeds, codes of behavior and rituals,”¹⁷³ “with its wide range of beliefs and practices is a way of life.”¹⁷⁴ That way of life is practiced all over Africa, and within the African Diaspora in the Americas. And, as Benjamin Ray writes, “peoples and cultures of Africa’s Atlantic diaspora in the New World, [are] increasingly renewing [their] ties of cultural heritage with sub-Saharan Africa, especially in religion, the arts, and popular culture.”¹⁷⁵

In sum, the African way of life corresponds to the deep cultural identity and worldview of the people from Black Africa and the African Diaspora. And that way of life is seen by outsiders as a religion or religions that “inform every aspect of life – including birthing and death, marriage, family dynamics, diet, dress and grooming, healthcare, the spending and saving of money,

¹⁷² Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), 161.

¹⁷³ Laurenti Magesa, “On Speaking terms. African Religion and Christianity in Dialogue,” in *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: The Second African Synod*, ed. A.E. Orobator (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 25.

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth Amoah, “African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty,” in *Religion and Poverty. Pan-African Perspectives*, ed. Peter J. Paris (Durham: Duke University press, 2009), 114.

¹⁷⁵ Benjamin Ray, *African Religions. Symbol, Ritual, and Community*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2000), x.

interactions with one's friends and neighbors, and of course, governance.”¹⁷⁶ The Congolese people share in that same religious and cultural identity, that same worldview, that same *African way of life*. In this essay, I will thus generally use the phrase *African way of life*. However, out of respect for various authors quoted, I will sometimes use “*African religions*.”

What then characterizes the African way of life? Given the wide variety of beliefs and practices, it is difficult to capture all the characteristics of the African way of life in a few lines. However, it is possible to mention three among the major ones.

2.1.1. A Holistic View on Reality

I already said that there is no such a word like “religion” in African languages. Further, there is no such a separate reality like “religion.” The African way of life knows “no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, the religious and non-religious, the spiritual and the material areas of life.”¹⁷⁷ In other words, “the sacred and the secular merge.”¹⁷⁸ Reality is one, and not dual.

The first consequence of this principle is that in the African way of life, the world is a community of beings in communion. That community comprises gods, spirits, ancestors, humans, animals, plants, minerals, etc. They all relate with one another in various ways. The second consequence of that principle is that the African way of life is very much concerned about every aspect of the concrete life. I will consider these two consequences as two other major characteristics of the African way of life.

¹⁷⁶ Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions. A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁷⁷ Mbiti, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Amoah, “African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty,” 114.

2.1.2. *A Community of Beings in Communion*

The world is made of beings related to one another. There are gods, goddesses, spirits, forces, ancestors, human beings, animals, plants and even non-living beings. Above all beings, there is a Supreme Being, God, Source of life. Male or female, or both, the Supreme Being is the Creator of the Earth, the seasons, every being. She or He “may also be seen as a divine principle embodying the idea of life, abundance and the blessings of human procreation and agricultural fertility.”¹⁷⁹

Below the Supreme Being, and sometimes deriving from Him/Her, are spiritual forces, identified with wind, or air, and consisting of spirits, souls, shadows and ghosts. It is important to mention that some of the forces are seen as evil forces, malevolent spirits, acting against human beings. To escape their bad influence, people rely on the ancestors.

The veneration of deceased parents and forebears, is fundamental in the African way of life. In some traditions, they are seen as equal to the deities. In fact, the distinction is not easy between the ancestors and the divinities. Unlike the Supreme Being, they are attached to a particular lineage, clan, and family. The Ancestors live in a realm similar to the humans one, but more beautiful: the “village of the ancestors.” They may re-incarnate in the newly born.

2.1.3. *The Power of Universal Life*

Another important characteristic of the African way of life is the concept of “power of life” or “vital force.” The African way of life values life and seeks to protect it. Life is everywhere, under various forms: sand, stones, water, air, animals, fish, plants or human beings. As Laurenti Magesa rightly puts it, “There is inner invisible power in anything at any given moment. In every

¹⁷⁹ Olupona, *African Religions*, 22.

activity, every thought, every word, every attitude, it is important to make sure that there is friendship or unity between what you see and what you do not see.”¹⁸⁰ In that perspective, the world is a universal body, in which circulates the same blood: life. God, the source of life, gave life to everything, by the very act of creation. The Earth is alive. Fire, forests, trees, animals, as well as human beings are alive. Life is everywhere and has to be respected.

A Balanced Approach to salvation

Given the “omnipresence” of life, any action must be oriented toward sustaining or increasing life in this world, and opening it to the other world. As Olupona nicely puts it, “African traditional religions typically strive for this-worldly salvation – measured in terms of health, wealth, and offspring – while at the same time maintaining close contact with the otherworldly realm of the ancestors, spirits and gods who are seen as having strong influence on the events and people in the here and now.”¹⁸¹ This is very important to be underlined, as it constitutes a balanced approach to salvation, compared to the “eternal salvation” and the “prosperity” approach. The African way of life offers a vision of salvation that takes into account the earthly life and opens to the otherworldly life.

2.2. The Ambiguous Relationships between the African Way of Life and Poverty

2.2.1. *The African Way of Life Can Help Alleviating Poverty*

2.2.2.3. *A Holistic View on Reality: Promoting Integral Well-Being and Hope*

I said earlier that the African way of life does not distinguish the categories of sacred and profane. In other words, it offers a unifying and holistic view of reality. Reality is not divided

¹⁸⁰ Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 27.

¹⁸¹ Olupona, *African Religions*, 3.

between material or spiritual, but it rather is “one.” Therefrom, the African way of life offers various discourses, rituals, practices and social mechanisms to strengthen that reality, here and now. Proverbs and sayings on poverty are found all over Africa, and serve as source of wisdom for education. They develop treasures of wisdom on the complexity of poverty and the way to promote an integral well-being. I can mention a few from Lingala, from Congo-Kinshasa:

- *Yeba talo ya kwanga tango baboti bazali na bomoi*: Know the price of bread while your parents are still alive. Learn from your parents how to escape hunger.
- *Mosala ezali tata pe mama*: Work is your father and mother. Rely on your personal efforts to succeed in life.
- *Mpiaka eza libandi te*: Poverty is not a fatality, unlike baldness. You can get rid of it.

Above all, I would like to emphasize the note of hope: there is always a way out of poverty.

2.2.2.4. *A Community of Beings in Communion: Promoting Human Dignity and Social Justice*

The second characteristic of African religions that I underlined is the community of beings. One might wonder what this has to do with poverty alleviation. If we look carefully into it, we will notice that the belief in gods, spirits and ancestors has a great impact on the way lands are managed and human beings treated. Deities and spirits inhabit the mountains, hills, forests, and ancestors are the owners of the lands and the custodians of natural resources. Consequently, lands cannot be sold outright to anyone. I remember having had to struggle with the chief of a village in Iniangi village, Congo-Zaire, from whom my Congregation wanted to buy a land. The chief and his counsel were strict: they could allow us to use the land for some years, but they would never sell it to us. The explanation is simple. As Elizabeth Amoah writes, “one of the means of dealing with poverty in traditional African society is to ensure an equitable distribution of land as basic

resource.”¹⁸² And this is based on the belief that lands are linked with the ancestors and spirits. Even when it happens that some people have an exclusive control over more fertile parts of the lands, they are compelled to “use the produce of the land to take care of those who do not have direct access.”¹⁸³ Hence, the African way of life try to preserve not only the lands, but also the human dignity of the less fortunate, and ensure social justice.

2.2.2.5. Power of Life: Promoting Solidarity and Environmental Care

The last characteristic I singled out is the “power of life.” This also can help grasp how the African way of life manages to alleviate poverty. Professor Olupona affirms that “abject poverty in many regions of the world is intimately connected to environmental mismanagement and the exclusion of the very people whose lands and resources have made other nations rich from a share of the wealth.”¹⁸⁴ I have just dealt with the second part of this statement, as I was reflecting on the sacredness of land, the requirement not to sell it, and the obligation to share the fruits of the lands with the needy. I need to add that the belief that all beings share the same life promotes the value of solidarity. Amoah uses the phrase “principle of sharing and reciprocity” to designate what I call “solidarity,” a typical feature of the African way of life, that “operates in such a way that the community’s resources (material and nonmaterial) are mobilized to ensure the welfare of all the members of the community.”¹⁸⁵ Various practices are related to that principle, such as leaving cooked food in certain places for the needy. Another practice in that line is that healers charge very little for their services, or even treat the sick for free.

¹⁸² Amoah, 118.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 119.

¹⁸⁴ Olupona, “Understanding Poverty and its Alleviation in Africa and the African Diaspora,” x.

¹⁸⁵ Amoah, 119.

The principle of solidarity goes beyond human beings. And that it is the first part of the above-mentioned statement of Jacob Olupona, “abject poverty in many regions of the world is intimately connected to environmental mismanagement.”¹⁸⁶ To prevent or fight this “environmental mismanagement,” African way of life lean on the conviction that, on one hand creation is the domain of the gods and spirits, and, on the other hand, every creature shares the same life as human beings.

In his article “African Spirituality and Environmental Conservation,” Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa, provides a striking illustration of the efficiency of this approach of the African way of life. All around Bomaswa hill in Tanzania, people strip off areas from their trees for charcoal and house building. Yet, no one ever dare to touch Bomaswa hill. Today, Bomaswa appears as a green island in the midst of a desert. What is the reason for that exception? Very simple: “Bomaswa is sacred.”¹⁸⁷ It is the domain of the gods and the ancestors. So, the African way of life promote “a feeling of mystery, awe and respect for nature”¹⁸⁸ based on the conviction and the deep consciousness that God is present, in a mysterious way, in the whole creation.

I have briefly shown how the African way of life provides insights and means for the alleviation of poverty. This might inspire the shaping of a Postcolonial Christianity concerned with the poor. However, it would be unfair and dishonest not to explore the other side of the medal: the African way of life may contribute to the increase of poverty. That is why any re-appropriation of the African way of life in the shaping of the Postcolonial Christianity, should be critical.

¹⁸⁶ Olupona, “Understanding Poverty and its Alleviation in Africa and the African Diaspora,” x.

¹⁸⁷ Laurenti Magesa, “African Spirituality and Environmental Conservation,” in *Indigenous Voices in the Sustainability Discourse*, ed. Frans Wijzen and Sylvia Marcos (Berlin: LIT, 2010), 131.

¹⁸⁸ Magesa, “African Spirituality,” 138.

2.2.2. *However, the African Way of life May Increase Poverty*

2.2.2.6. *Merging Sacred and Profane: The Danger of Shirking One's Responsibilities*

The non-distinction between the sacred and the profane may become dangerous if it leads to believing in fate: everything is decided beforehand by some powers above us. The danger consists in seeing everything as related to the “supernatural,” and forgetting the “natural.” Socio-economic realities are basically human made. And human beings have the capacity, the possibility and the responsibility of doing or undoing a socio-economic reality such as poverty, without referring to the Sacred. Forgetting that might lead to resignation and acceptance of one's socio-economic situation, without any effort to change it, which would increase poverty. To prevent that risk, any critical re-appropriation of the African way of life to shape the Postcolonial Christianity should emphasize the virtue of hard work, as these two Akan proverbs brought by Elizabeth Amoah clearly state, “*Edwuma mmbu kon*” (Hard work does not break one's neck) and “*Sika wo antaban, out se anoma*” (Money has wings; it can fly as a bird does).¹⁸⁹

2.2.2.7. *Gods, Spirits, Ancestors: The Paralyzing Fear of Witches*

Another element from the African way of life that might contribute to increase poverty is related to the omnipresence of spirits. I already said that some of the deities or non-human beings are considered as evil forces, malevolent spirits. Some people may get in touch with evil forces and manipulate them to do harm. Witches are feared and ostracized. In fact, as Olupona rightly observes, “one of the most common reasons for someone to be suspected of witchcraft is if she seems to be doing inexplicably better than her neighbors. That is to say, she has a slightly nicer house, more food, her crops do better, or she has a bit of extra money.”¹⁹⁰ In these circumstances,

¹⁸⁹ Amoah, 120.

¹⁹⁰ Olupona, *African Religions*, 50.

any personal initiative – that can allow an individual to succeed in terms of well-being – runs the risk of being look at suspiciously. Hence, initiatives are paralyzed, and way is given to the increase of poverty.

Of course, there can be objections to my analysis. One may say that behind the construct of witchcraft, lies the need to eradicate selfishness and to ensure that success is not achieved or enjoyed alone, but with and within the community. Still, I think, the danger of killing the sense of initiative is real. Thus, a Postcolonial Christianity should be very cautious while dealing with the issue of Witchcraft.

2.2.2.8. Power of Life: The Risk of Parasitism and Overpopulation

Talking about the need to ensure that individuals succeed and enjoy the fruits of their success with and within the community, refers us back to the principle of solidarity which derives from the fact that we do share the same life. This principle also may lead to the increase of poverty if it is not properly applied. Indeed, it is easy for people to live like parasites, benefitting from the labor and generosity of other people, on behalf of solidarity.

Finally, the emphasis on life demands that people be fecund, to avoid dying forever. Progeny also ensures the reincarnation of the ancestors, guarantees a workforce and constitutes a life insurance for their parents. The reverse of the medal is that people happen to have lots of children even when they cannot take care of them. This also contributes to the increase of poverty.

This brief analysis has shown that the African way of life offers several values that can help alleviate poverty. However, there is a need to understand rightly these values and apply them correctly to avoid the danger of increasing poverty. I am always amazed at the way a particular

African church, the Kimbanguist church, was able to proceed to a critical-re-appropriation of the African way of life. Its case might inspire Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire.

2.3. Critical Re-Appropriation of the African Way of Life: The Inspiring Case of Kimbanguism

2.3.1. *The Kimbanguist Church and Its Founder*

With 17 million believers in Africa and all over the world, the *Church of Jesus Christ on the earth through His Special Messenger, the Prophet Simon Kimbangu*,¹⁹¹ simply known as “Kimbanguist Church,” is among the largest African Independent Churches (AIC). As Mugambi explains, “Independent churches in Africa have erupted in the twentieth century as a reaction against the cultural arrogance of the modern missionary enterprise.”¹⁹² Most of the AIC revived major elements of the African way of life.

The Kimbanguist movement began in 1921, under the guidance of Simon Kimbangu, born in 1889, in N’kamba village, in the south-western part of the then Belgian Congo. He was baptized as a Baptist Christian. The Baptist missionaries portray him as “of above average intelligence, a strong personality, a man of good knowledge of the Bible... a good and thoughtful man who reads his Bible and performs his tasks conscientiously.”¹⁹³ They thus appointed him as catechist. Obviously, Kimbangu had a good knowledge of Christian faith, through his reading of the Bible, and his duties of catechist. He was also well immersed in his Kongo culture. Besides, he happened to spend some time as worker in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), the capital city of the Belgian Congo, where he witnessed and lived the concrete situation of his people: poverty and oppression.

¹⁹¹ The official name is in French : *Eglise de Jésus-Christ sur la terre par son Envoyé Spécial, le Prophète Simon Kimbangu*.

¹⁹² Mugambi, 43.

¹⁹³ Marie-Louise Martin, *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 44.

I assume that his ministry was triggered by this experience of poverty and oppression. Witnesses say that Kimbangu began his ministry with the miraculous healing of a young woman named *Kiantondo*, at Ngombe-Kinsuka, on 6th April 1921. From there followed a series of healings of crippled, blind, deaf people, etc. And Simon Kimbangu began to preach, calling for the recognition of equality between people before God, no matter their “color.” His ministry was very short. Five months after, the colonial government had him arrested, judged and sentenced to death on October 3, 1921 by a military court. The King of Belgium, Albert I, commuted this sentence into life imprisonment. So, Kimbangu was deported to Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) where he spent the last 30 years of his life in prison and solitary confinement. Kimbangu in prison, his followers persecuted, the movement nevertheless continued to spread and to grow, ending up to be recognized and established as a “Church” in 1959, six months before the independence of the Congo-Zaire.

2.3.2. *Kimbanguism Upholding the Value of “Kintwadi” or Solidarity*

In the Kimbanguism, from the very beginning, there is evidence of a will to decolonize Christian Faith. During his short ministry, Kimbangu was able to draw values from the heritage of the African way of life as experienced in the Kongo. He had a very clear idea of the new faith he was calling for, and named it “*Kintwadi*,” a Kikongo word equivalent to “fellowship,” “fraternity,” “solidarity” and sometimes used to mean “society.”

The basis of the *Kintwadi* in Kimbanguism is the African value of solidarity extended beyond the borders of family, clan or tribe, in the name of Jesus Christ. *Kintwadi* is close to the universally known African principle of “Ubuntu” summarized in the aphorism “I am because we are.”

Within the *Kintwadi*, cultural elements serve the greater glory of God. In his preaching, Kimbangu involved Kongo proverbs. He also promoted traditional healing. Above all, Simon Kimbangu showed a great concern for the reality of poverty and oppression facing the Congolese people, in particular, and Black Africans in general. Unlike the missionaries, his message met the actual needs of the people: liberation from oppression and poverty. Ironically, this was used as argument by his accusers, as it appears in the report of the colonial administrator of Mbanza-Ngungu, Léon Morel. He writes: “Kimbangu wants to found a religion which is in accord with the mentality of the African, a religion which contains the characteristics of Protestantism but with the addition of practices taken from *fetishism*.”¹⁹⁴ The word “*fetishism*” was used to designate any African traditional religion. So, Morel is involuntarily telling us about the call of Kimbangu for an authentically African Christian faith, as his report goes on, “everyone can readily see that the religions of Europe are completely shot through with abstractions and, in no way correspond to the mentality of the African, who long for tangible facts and protection. The teaching of Kimbangu suits him because it is supported by palpable facts.”¹⁹⁵

2.3.3. *The Value of “Kintwadi” Applied: A Community of Love, Rules and Hard Work*

The Kimbanguist doctrine is summarized in the Lingala trilogy “*Bolingo, Mibeko, Misala*”: “Love, Rules, Work.”

The first element of the trilogy, *Bolingo* (love) results from the recognition that people share the same source of life. This is a way of referring to the “power of universal life” I have discussed earlier. The *Kintwadi* acknowledges that “universal life” and the fact that people come

¹⁹⁴ Martin, *Kimbangu: an African Prophet and his Church*, 57.

¹⁹⁵ Martin, 57.

from the same Creator, no matter their race. Kimbangu preached universal salvation and equality between people. His vision was a revolution at the time, and was perceived as subversive by the colonizers, convinced that they were superior to the indigenous. Even after its official recognition, the Kimbanguist Church kept that dimension and refused to be “the church of Black people.” Moreover, it worked for the empowerment of women, in a society and a time where women were considered as second class persons.

The second element of the trilogy, *Mibeko* refers to the respect of the commandments of God and the rules of the *Kintwadi*. It is about discipline. As a community, the *Kintwadi* cannot survive without rules. And everyone is supposed to commit himself/herself in the respect of these rules for his/her own good and the good of the whole *Kintwadi*.

Misala, hard work, the third element of the trilogy, is precisely one of those rules, the most important as regards to the life of the *Kintwadi*. Every member of the community is called to work hard for himself/herself and for the *Kintwadi*. Kimbanguists have set a very efficient system of local fund raising and solidarity called “*Nsinsani*,” which helped them to build a self-reliant Church. They succeeded to gain economic freedom.

I find the model of the *Kintwadi* very inspiring for the shaping of a Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire.

2.3.4. “*Kintwadi*” Inspiring the Shaping of a Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire

“Why, twenty years after the local churches were handed over to an indigenous clergy, are these churches still treated as spiritual colonies of a foreign religion?”¹⁹⁶ That is the cry of Jean-Marc Ela, looking at the socio-economic reality of Christian churches in Africa. Analyzing the

¹⁹⁶ Ela, 102.

case of Catholics, he rightly notices that most Catholic dioceses and parishes in Africa rely on the West for their sustenance. Fabien Eboussi Boulaga uses very tough words, calling them “beggar churches” that “speak only to conform themselves to the implicit or explicit expectations of those who come to their assistance. They approach the latter only to solicit them or to thank them.”¹⁹⁷ This bondage to the “mother churches,” those who sent the missionaries, those who organized the first and second evangelization, is still strong for the church in the Congo-Zaire

I find that bondage as dangerous as colonization. It does not allow the Congolese churches to get out of poverty and dependence. And consequently, as long as themselves they are not self-reliant, these Congolese churches cannot contribute efficiently to their people’s struggle against poverty. That is why the example of the Kimbanguists’ *Kintwadi* and *nsinsani* should inspire Catholic, Protestant and other churches in the Congo-Zaire, their way towards self-reliance. The churches of the Postcolonial Christianity will be self-reliant, or will not be. Instead of relying on “mother churches,” those churches they can build a *kintwadi*, solidarity, between “sister poor churches.” This will certainly help alleviate poverty and dependence.

Finally, I would like to highlight another value promoted by Kimbanguism: *mosala*, hard work. Kimbanguists discovered quickly that *mosala* is the cornerstone for poverty alleviation. This also could inspire the shaping of the Postcolonial Christianity. One of the ways of upholding this value could be to look at agriculture. As said in the first chapter of this essay, the Congo-Zaire, with its fertile lands is essentially an agrarian society. The process of poverty alleviation may begin with rediscovering the importance of agriculture. As Ela rightly notes, “peasants form today the most miserable, oppressed class.”¹⁹⁸ And we know that around 75 % of people suffering from

¹⁹⁷ Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes*, 226.

¹⁹⁸ Ela, 84.

hunger in the world are peasants, people involved in agriculture, people whose vocation is to feed the rest of the world.¹⁹⁹ That is a great challenge, linked to many political questions and to injustice and oppression. The churches of Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire might need to look at that dimension and find a place in the rural area, among peasants, among the poorest of the poor, living with them, working with them, sharing their joys and hopes. The Churches of Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire will be Churches of the poor, or will not be.

3. Rooted in the Preferential Option for the Poor

3.1. Understanding the Preferential Option for the Poor

3.1.1. At the Heart of Christian Faith

The phrase “preferential option for the poor” is not found anywhere in the Bible. However, its spirit pervades the whole Scripture, through and through. From the first pages of Genesis to the last pages of Revelation, God is on the side of the poor, and fight for the oppressed.

God takes side for the poor Abel murdered by his brother Cain (Genesis4). Some chapters further God takes care of the barren women, Rebekah, Rachel who are being despised. And then comes the beautiful story of Joseph sold as a slave by his brothers, but protected by the Lord to the point of becoming governor in Egypt (Genesis 41:45; 42:6).

The book of Exodus is the best account of the option of the Lord for the poor, the oppressed. God comes down to save the poor Israel:

*I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt;
I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.*

¹⁹⁹ Michel Griffon, *Nourrir la Planète* (Paris : Odile Jacob, 2006), 57.

*Indeed, I know their sufferings,
And I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.*

This text of Exodus 3:7–8 (NRSV) sounds as an anticipation of the Incarnation. God comes in this world to save the poor, the oppressed. For the Wisdom books, “the oppressors are murderers,”²⁰⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez writes. This is clearly stated in the book of Ecclesiasticus, for instance: “The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a murderer. To take away a neighbor’s living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wage is to shed blood.” (Ecclesiasticus 34: 21–22). And when the poor Job wonders on the apparent prosperity of the wicked (Job 21: 13-15), he questions the doctrine of retribution. No, the poor are not paying for their sins. And the prosperity of the wicked is not a sign of blessing. And the Lord is not blind. The Psalmist will sing that “Though the wicked sprout like grass, and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever.” (Psalm 92:7 NRSV)

The prophets Jeremiah (22:13-17); Amos (5:11-12), Micah (2:9-10), etc., denounce those who exploit the poor. They proclaim God as the one who takes care of the widow and the orphan. God takes side for the *anawim*, “the poor of God.” The new Heaven and the new Earth announced by the Prophet Isaiah (65:20-22) are a promise of a new Exodus, and the end of oppression. The Trito-Isaiah has these powerful words that Jesus will apply to himself later: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... because the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.*” (Isaiah 61:1-2; Cf. Luke 4:18-19). NRSV.

²⁰⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “The Suffering of Others,” in *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 124.

Jesus' Incarnation, Life and Death constitute a striking testimony of that preferential option of God for the poor. The beautiful hymn found in the Letter to the Philippians recalls that "*Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.*" (Philippians 2: 6-9 NRSV). That κένωσις (self-emptying) is the greatest manifestation of God's preferential option for the poor. God does not simply love the poor or sympathize with them. Rather God becomes one of them, to save them, to set them free. The ministry of Jesus also shows that preference. He weeps with those mourning, heals the sick, rehabilitates the victims of segregation and injustice, the adulterer, the prostitutes, or the publicans; and speaks with the women, what was not expected from a *rabbi*. Likewise, Jesus welcomes the poor, and the children. Gustavo Gutiérrez insists that "in the cultural world of Jesus' time, children were regarded as defectives. Together with the poor, the sick, and women, and relegated to the status of the inconsequential."²⁰¹

The teaching of Jesus also underlines that preferential option. For instance, the two versions of the Beatitudes in Matthew or Luke agree on the fact that "the Reign of God will belong to those who live in conditions of weakness or oppression."²⁰² Comparing the two versions, people generally consider Matthew to be "spiritualizing" the Beatitudes while Luke is more concrete, speaking about materially poor persons.²⁰³ I personally hold, with Gutiérrez, that Matthew is not less concerned about reality, about the materially poor. Throughout Matthew's gospel, the concern for material poverty is clear. For instance, the *parable of the final judgment* in Matthew 25:31-46 clearly states as criteria for judgment the concrete actions in favor of the poor, the needy: "I was

²⁰¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in *Systematic Theology. Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 29.

²⁰² Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 29.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 30.

hungry and you gave me food; I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” So, what Matthew does when dealing with the Beatitudes is putting them in the perspective of discipleship. As Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “The Matthean beatitudes indicate the basic attitudes of the disciple who receives the Reign of God in solidarity with others.”²⁰⁴ Poverty is about following Christ Poor and being a sign of God’s Reign.

Hence, being a *sign of the Reign of God*,²⁰⁵ the Church should embrace the same preferential option for the poor, and really be a Church of the poor. And indeed, so was the Church in its beginning, as Paul testifies, in his address to the Corinthians, “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were powerful; not many were of noble-birth (...) God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak to shame the strong.” (I Corinthians 1: 26 – 29 NRSV).

3.1.2. *Lost and Found: The Irruption of the Poor*

However, for long the poor have been “absent” from the Church. They have been ignored, neglected. Indeed, moving from a small group of people under persecution, to a *religion of State* as decreed by the Emperor Theodosius in 381 CE, the Church found herself powerful, and on the side of the powerful. That situation lasted for centuries. The Church of the poor was lost. She was replaced by a solid and rich institution, more concerned about her own expansion and wealth than about the poor. I need to acknowledge that “Prophets” appeared here and there during that time. And individual holy women and men really sided with the poor, offered their lives to serve them. While John XXIII expressed his desire for a Church of the Poor, the bishops did not engage this

²⁰⁴ Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” 31.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 34.

topic. Indeed, a few weeks before the opening of the council Vatican II, pope John XXIII called for a *Church of the poor*: “As for the underdeveloped countries, the Church is and wishes to be the Church of all and especially the Church of the Poor.”²⁰⁶

Later on, As I already explained, in the section about Latin America Liberation Theology, in the second chapter of this essay, the Latin America Bishops’ Conference gathered in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and in Puebla, Mexico in 1979 broadened the concept. Medellin insisted on the image of Christ coming to bring freedom from various evils: moral, physical and social and Christ’s presence in the oppressed. Puebla stressed the presence of Christ now in history: in the Church, Scripture, faithful, and especially in the poor, with particular tenderness. Christ chose to identify Himself with those who are poorest and weakest. The call of John XXIII is being renewed today by Pope Francis: “a church poor for the poor.” This means real commitment, not an attitude of neutrality. In front of poverty, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “neutrality is impossible.”²⁰⁷ Rather there is a call for “active participation.”²⁰⁸ This is to say, that the image of the Church in the middle of the village should be replaced by the Church clearly taking side with the poor. The preferential option for the poor is that active participation. It entails solidarity with the poor, and struggle to understand the root causes of their poverty and to work with them to end it, to transform it.

3.1.3. The Hallmark of a Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire

As showed in the second chapter of this essay, the missionary Christianity in the Congo-Zaire failed to live out the preferential option for the poor. Therefore, the Postcolonial Christianity should radically embrace that option, and make it its hallmark. Bearing witness to God in the

²⁰⁶ Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” 30.

²⁰⁷ Gutiérrez, “The Suffering of Others,” 119.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

Postcolonial Christianity, will be possible “only in solidarity with the poor and oppressed.”²⁰⁹ Jean-Marc Ela finds the best fitting words as he writes, “After centuries of slavery and colonization, in which the salvation of the pagans was a cover for a tacit agreement between Christianity and the new empires, the meaning of the evangelical message can only be found by Christians and churches that deliberately put themselves on the side of the weak and the lowly.”²¹⁰

In other words, the preferential option for the poor is not an option for the Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire. It is a must. Otherwise, Christianity will remain in contradiction with Christ’s life and deeds, and the paradox of poverty will keep going on. The liberation of the poor and the oppressed “is the sign of the advent of the eschatological kingdom.”²¹¹ And to work to that liberation, the Church itself needs to be free. As Ela puts it, “Christianity must have its hands free to cease being that religion whose compromise with the forces that oppress is in contradiction with what it proclaims.”²¹²

How then to concretely implement the preferential option for the poor in the Postcolonial Christianity of the Congo-Zaire?

3.2. Implementing the Preferential Option for the Poor: Conscientization and Agency

3.2.1. *Conscientization : Raising Critical Awareness*

The first step out of poverty is raising awareness, making people aware of their own poverty. This will be one of the tasks of postcolonial Christianity committed to the preferential

²⁰⁹ Ela, *African Cry*, 55.

²¹⁰ Ela, *Repenser la théologie africaine*, 84.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

option for the poor. How to raise that awareness? The pedagogical approach of Paulo Freire seems to me very effective in that purpose. Paulo Freire (1921-1997), a Brazilian educator, built a genuine methodology based on a move from uncritical to critical consciousness. A teacher of the Portuguese language at the secondary school, he shifted to committing himself to educating peasants in the north-east of Brazil. His method of education made people reflect on their social and cultural condition. That commitment will lead him to experience prison and exile because of his educational commitment to the liberation of the oppressed.

The pedagogical approach of Paulo Freire appears clearly in the titles of his various works, starting with the first, which he wrote in prison: *Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Then came *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one of the most quoted texts on education, especially in popular and informal education, as Freire himself was dealing with adults. Finally, *Pedagogy of Hope*, which aims at “*reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,” as its subtitle claims.

Freire rejects the “banking model of education” in which the teacher is considered the sole origin of knowledge, and the student as a mere receptor. He criticizes that method whereby “the teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students.”²¹³ Unlike the colonial pedagogical system, Freire’s approach wants to let people find their way, by themselves, critically, and look at reality as something they can change. In that perspective, he recommends a dialogue, a conversation between the learner and the educator, and further, between the learner, the educator and the environment.

²¹³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 52.

The pedagogy of conscientization.

Paulo Freire's educational method is based on "problem-posing,"²¹⁴ questioning. This questioning allows the emergence of *conscientização*,²¹⁵ "conscientization." When he says *conscientização*, Freire has in mind "transcending myths" and opening up to a new level of consciousness, consciousness of being subject and not object. Therefore, he posits "education as a practice of freedom,"²¹⁶ through questioning. That questioning itself is already a step towards the exit from oppression. And there is no worse oppression than ignorance. That is the reason why no oppressive system allows the oppressed to open his mouth and ask "Why?" Questioning allows access to consciousness, and poses the individual as a subject in front of other subjects. It makes the individual able to say "I." Imperialism or colonialism does not allow the individual to say "I," to be a subject. It aims at using them as objects, commodities. And Freire expounds, "As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically 'accept' their exploitation."²¹⁷ On the contrary, if they can question their condition, find the causes of their situation, and pose themselves as subjects, as "I," they make a fundamental step towards their own liberation and the liberation of their oppressor. Thus, Postcolonial Christianity is possible only if the individuals are able to say "I" and to ask "why?"

Action-oriented pedagogy.

Questioning, speech, is the beginning of liberation, but it is not enough. Speech alone, without action, is "verbalism." It is empty, hollow. Change cannot be born. Action without reflection is "activism." It is empty, hollow. Change cannot be born. It is necessary to combine action and

²¹⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 61.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

reflection, commitment and speech. It is from this pair that arises the praxis which allows change to happen.²¹⁸

The challenge for Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire is to be able to change the educational system inherited from colonization, and turn it to a system of conscientization. Many medias are available for that: parishes, small Christian communities, schools, books, reviews, TV and radio-broadcasting, Internet, etc. The outcome should be having the poor aware of the situation of impoverishment they have gone through, reflect on its causes, and their potentiality to transform their condition. The Church does well in speaking on behalf of the poor, but Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire needs the poor to be able to speak for themselves, and to undertake actions in order to change their condition. In other words, what is needed is not a Church “voice of the voiceless,” but a Church that allows the voiceless to be their own voice.

3.2.2. Agency: Letting the Poor Say “I” and Undertake Action

I already spoke about Amartya Sen, in the first chapter. His major work, *Development as Freedom*, expresses a genuine vision of development. He proposes an explanatory diagram of the development, known as “Capabilities Approach”. “A person’s capability refers to the alternative combinations of “functionings” that he or she can achieve. Capability is thus the freedom to achieve various lifestyles,” Amartya Sen says.²¹⁹ The economist considers development as the spreading of “capabilities.” This spreading is possible only through a conjunction of the potentialities of individuals and the opportunities offered by the society.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

²¹⁹ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 75.

The work of conscientization we have just talked about can help the people become conscious of their potentialities. And Sen's approach aims at promoting the blossoming of all the potentialities that an individual may carry in him/her or in his/her environment so that he/she may live fully. This purpose is totally in accordance with the Gospel, with the mission of Christ and of the Church: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10, 10).

However, any potentiality is useless, unless it is transformed into capability. And that transformation is permitted by the "opportunities" met. Thus, finding potentialities is not enough. We need to create opportunities that fit these potentialities in order to transform them into capabilities. And opportunities depend on the structures of the society. It is the duty of Postcolonial Christianity to struggle against unjust structures, structures of oppression and death, that do not give any opportunity for the poor to develop their potentialities. And then, there will be a need to replace them by just structures, structures of life, structures that allow the people to transform their potentialities into capabilities.

Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire will have to fight against tribalism, nepotism, and clericalism. About this latter point, a wonderful experiment was conducted by the former Archbishop of Kinshasa, Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula (1917-1989). In 1975, after three years of theological formation, he instituted some lay married men as responsible of parishes. They were called *Bakambi* (plural; *Mokambi*, singular) and had the full responsibility of the parish that the bishop assigned to them. A visiting-priest, ordained minister, would come only for the celebration of the Sacrament. For Cardinal Malula, "the institution of the ministry of the *Mokambi* of Parish in our local Church is a prophetic sign, in front of the Universal Church, that we need to take seriously the role of lay people in the Church."²²⁰ It is unfortunate that the experiment faced lots

²²⁰ Joseph-Albert Cardinal Malula, "Le rôle des laïcs dans la vie et la mission de l'Église," in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. Léon de Saint Moulin sj (Kinshasa : Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1997), 41.

of opposition from the authorities of the Church and did not develop as much as the Cardinal and the people expected.

Coming back to the creation of opportunities, I need to say that the transformation of potentialities into capabilities creates a new situation that should again be analyzed, examined by the people, to see whether those capabilities are potentialities for something better. The purpose is always to ensure that the process does not end, and that the poor continue to think and act by themselves to change their situation. I borrow and apply to the case of Congo-Zaire what Mugambi says about Africa when he writes, “it ought not to be assumed that solutions to social and economic problems worked out by other societies can be packaged for Africa. Africans must think for themselves. Though they do not have to re-invent the wheel (social or industrial), they may yet invent new uses for it, or discover new ways of making it.”²²¹

3.3. Implementing the Preferential Option for the Poor: Empowering Women

3.3.1. *Women, Standard-bearers of the Postcolonial Christianity*

There is no way of talking about potentialities, opportunities and capabilities in the Congo-Zaire, without looking at the striking question of gender. And there is no way of talking about Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire without considering the situation of women. Women are the poorest among the poor in the Congo-Zaire. To borrow the phrase from the Final Document of the CELAM conference of Puebla, women are “doubly oppressed and marginalized.”²²² For too long they have been marginalized, and oppressed. Abused during the times of conquest and colonization, they are still abused today. Recent violence and war in the Congo-Zaire saw several

²²¹ Mugambi, 42.

²²² Puebla Final Document, n°1135, note 297.

of women being savagely raped, reduced to the rank of sexual slaves. Rape is being used as a weapon by both parties in conflict, to try to win over the other. If violence against women seems to be the rule in the “secular” society, Christianity has been very shy to fight that situation. Within the Catholic Church itself, the situation of women has not always been fair. Women have been segregated in many ways. For instance, Congolese theologian Josée Ngalula writes, “there was a time during Eucharistic celebration, when women were grouped on one side of the church, while men were on the other, thus physically separating couples and families at the heart of the Eucharistic celebration.”²²³ Sister Josée Ngalula says “there was a time” as though it was passed. I personally experienced the same reality while ministering in a rural area in the Congo-Zaire, not more than two years ago. The situation has perhaps changed in the urban areas, but in the villages, it is still the same. Josée Ngalula adds that “for centuries, the catholic Church has experienced celebrations in which all those who played major liturgical roles were men.”²²⁴ This also might have changed in urban areas, but not so much in the rural areas. Traditions of segregation of women because of their gender are so strong, deeply rooted in the society.

Gender issue...

In fact, genders are social roles. They were built to keep the social fabric stable and to make the social machine function. Christianity is also a social machine. Some parts of that machine are so deeply linked with the total organization of the machine, that any change would mean to review the whole system. This is the case for gender issue. It certainly needs change. But an efficient

²²³ Josée Ngalula, “Milestones in Achieving a More Incisive Feminine Presence in the Church of Pope Francis,” in *The Church We Want. African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, ed. A.E. Orobator (New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 35.

²²⁴ Josée Ngalula, “Milestones in Achieving a More Incisive Feminine Presence in the Church of Pope Francis,” 36.

change would mean to review the whole social fabric, the whole system. And that is a great challenge for Postcolonial Christianity, as for any social organization.

Talking about women, the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Africae Munus* recommends to the local Churches to put in place concrete structures to ensure real participation of women at “appropriate levels.” (n°25) But the Synods itself acknowledges that “a lot still needs to be done.”

Indeed, gender role is a strong and solid construct. However, it is possible to make it malleable: as for iron, one needs to put it into fire, at a very high temperature, for a long duration, and work on it patiently. Only then, it becomes malleable and is given the wanted shape. In a similar way, the gender issue in the Congo-Zaire needs to be put in the fire of a deep reflection, trying to take all its parameters into account.

Concretely, which blacksmith work would be needed? I personally see four types of necessary works: education, language, imagination and policies. First, there is a need to educate people, older as well as younger generations, to an openness of mind on gender issues. Secondly, we should capitalize on the treasures of languages. For instance, many African languages are inclusive. Thirdly, imagination should be used to create new approaches regarding genders. By imagination, I refer to the creativity of the mind, the capacity of thinking and interpreting. In Theology, as an example, the concept of a “Maternal God,” should be more explored and promoted. Scripture passages concerning gender should be reinterpreted taking into account the gender issue. Imagination is also about designing, in a very practical, way how things should function with new approaches to gender. For instance, figure out and design how to organize the structures for the system “Catholic Church” to function with women priests. And then, policies

should help organize the education, promote the fitting language and implement the fruits of mind's creativity. To succeed in this review, a final ingredient is needed: time.

I have been talking about language and God's gender. Looking at the question in the perspective of postcolonialism, Kwok Pui-lan criticizes "the disproportionate amount of time and energy paid to inclusive language and the gender of God."²²⁵ And I give her credit for that. Indeed, she acknowledges that "the change in language is necessary, because language shapes consciousness and has the power to constitute reality."²²⁶ However, she strongly affirms that this should not be the focus of all the energy. "The struggle for gender justice, for those without safe water to drink and adequate food to put on the table, cannot be fought primarily at the cultural-symbolic level, without simultaneously attending to sociopolitical struggles."²²⁷ Hence, the need to attend to those structures that are creating thousands of victims. So, for me, in Postcolonial Christianity, the question of gender should be put in terms of women conscientization, women agency, and in relation with the wider struggle against any form of colonization, any kind of imperialism. And that is the approach taken by Wangari Maathai.

3.3.2. The Stimulating Example of Wangari Maathai

The power, the strength and the leadership of Wangari Maathai, Kenyan environmental and political activist, are impressive and stimulating. Educated in Catholic settings, she still remained deeply rooted in the African Way of Life, not missing any opportunity to claim that. She realized that "the physical destruction of the earth extends to humanity too" and "reciprocally that "in the process of helping the Earth to heal, we heal ourselves."²²⁸

²²⁵ Kwok Pui-lan, 129.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid., 130.

²²⁸ Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 17.

She thus founded the *Green Belt* and began activities aiming at both empowering the women and protecting the environment. As she herself describes it,

local women grew indigenous tree seedlings and planted them in the forest. For each seedling that survived, the women (and some men who joined them) were compensated with a small financial incentive to continue their work. If a woman planted many trees and ensured they survived, she could earn a decent income to pay for school uniforms, books and fees.²²⁹

Wangari Maathai's experience was successful, and the people acknowledged it. She contributed at the two levels: the level of the discourse and the level of the praxis.

Many of my constituents told me that they saw that the rivers were healthier. They had gained a greater understanding of the role the forests play in providing water. They were also, through much environmental education, aware of the alternatives to encroaching on the forests. (...) In addition, they were aware that crops could be cultivated in shambas (*fields in Swahili*) outside the forest.²³⁰

I remember having made the same experiment a couple of years ago in a remote area called Iniangi, in the Congo-Zaire, with the local villagers: training them to grow crops in the savannah and no longer in the forest. In fact, people prefer growing crops in the forest, because of the fertility of the soil there. But to do so, they cut and burn trees, thus destroying this particular ecosystem. Cultivating in the savannah help avoid the destruction of the forest and of the animals who live there. However, getting people to join the experiment was not easy. Though we invited villagers regardless of the gender, most of the people who joined were women. Certainly, because they are the ones who grow crops, while men go hunting. Anyway, I was convinced that if we succeed to train women, they will certainly convince their husbands. The experiment is still going on.

²²⁹ Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 246.

²³⁰ Ibid.

On her experiment, Wangari Maathai faced failure, and disappointment. As she writes, “A substantial number of the same people who welcomed the return of the river and the regrowth of the forest informed me that they would still prefer to return to the forest to cultivate food crops because of the high demand for and cost of food. (..) They were unable to think beyond their immediate needs.”²³¹

She had thus to commit herself in advocacy, to get political and religious leaders that they “entrusted with the long-term welfare of both the people and the resources that they need to survive.”²³² At the same time, she fought for peace, convinced that “if we are serious about engendering cultures of peace in Africa, protection and rehabilitation of the environment must be a priority. This is partly because at the heart of many of the conflicts that continue to challenge Africa are degraded land, depleted water sources, lack of rain, poor soils and desertification.”²³³ When she passed away, in 2011, at the age of 71, this laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize 2004 bequeathed to posterity the inspiring model of an African woman fully committed in the empowering other women, while at the same time struggling against any model of domination, any kind of oppression, or colonization, especially oppression against the Earth. In the same line, the Feminist Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether writes, “there can be no liberation for women and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination.”²³⁴ And this allows me to explore the last way of implementing the preferential option for the poor: the care for the earth.

²³¹ Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 247.

²³² *Ibid.*, 248.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 249.

²³⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York : Seabury Press, 1975), 204.

3.4. Implementing the Preferential Option for the Poor: Caring for the Earth

3.4.1. *The Earth, Poor and Oppressed*

The Earth is among the poor and the oppressed in the Congo-Zaire. As shown in the first chapter, the conquest and colonization aimed at exploiting the resources of the Earth. Christianity served to facilitate that exploitation of the Earth. And if the work of exploitation was without mercy for the people, it was also cruel for the Earth, for the environment. After the independence, the work of exploitation continued, and it still goes on, without paying attention to the damages caused to the environment. The Congo-Zaire has been at war for twenty years, now; a war motivated by the greed over natural resources. “The logic that exploits classes and subjects people to the interest of a few rich and powerful countries is the same as the logic that devastates the Earth and plunders its wealth showing no solidarity with the rest of humankind and future generations,” Leonardo Boff writes.²³⁵

3.4.1.1. *The Earth: An “Assortment of Natural Resources” to Be Used?*

Some pages earlier, I talked about how the African way of life promotes “a feeling of mystery, awe and respect for nature”²³⁶ based on the conviction and the deep consciousness that God is present, in a mysterious way, in the whole creation. I also underlined the conviction that all beings share the same life. Therefore, there is a deep relationship between all beings, including the Earth. The Earth is our home, our living place. It supports our life and provides us with the necessary resources for our survival. It is made of non-living and living beings. It is not simply

²³⁵ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, xi.

²³⁶ Magesa, “African Spirituality,” 138.

“an assortment of natural resources or a physical and chemical reservoir of raw materials.”²³⁷ Unfortunately, that is the way we have been looking at it, I would better say “at her,” for centuries. We have been using nature’s resources for millenniums, thinking that the environment will always reconstitute them.

3.4.1.2. *The Earth under Threat*

But the work or reconstitution of natural resources takes time, a long time. Using resources too fast or at a too big scale makes it more difficult to reconstitute them. In these times of massive industrialization, we have been using the Earth’s resources so fast and so greedily that the process of regeneration has been threatened. And in fact, the Earth herself is threatened. Some signs of this “threats” are already there, in spite of us refusing to see them: “Turbulent weather patterns, stripping of the rain forests, extinction of thousands of species every year, gross exploitation of natural resources – are all manifestations of a starving, screaming planet no longer capable of satisfying the insatiable compulsions of the primary predator, *homo sapiens*.”²³⁸

Beside the abuse of natural resources, our socio-economic activities generate wastes with a big impact on the environment. These various emissions induce a change on environmental processes. They cause terrible harm to the Earth: degradation of vegetation, soil erosion, air and water pollution, extinction of species and loss of biodiversity. Pope Francis, in his last Encyclical, *Laudato Si’* describes that dramatic situation as follows

Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources. The earth, our home,

²³⁷ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 12.

²³⁸ Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality: A New Spiritual Framework for Today’s World* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1997), 145.

is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish.²³⁹

3.4.2. *A Preferential Option for the Earth*

3.4.2.1. *Scriptural Outlook: The Earth Mourning and Groaning for Salvation*

Various biblical texts depict the Earth as suffering, mourning, under oppression. In Isaiah 24: 4-6, the Prophet says that “The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, and the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants.” And Hosea complains, “The land mourns ... together with the wild animals and the birds of the air.” (Hosea 4: 1-3) On his side, the Prophet Joel plays with the double meaning of the word “*Adamah*” as he writes, “the soil is mourning.” (Joel 1:10). *Adamah* signifies the soil, but it is also the name of the first human being in the Bible. Thus, Joel is identifying the soil, the Earth and Human kind. And Paul who says that “all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now” (Romans 8:22), also underlines that human beings are part of that creation and are also groaning for Salvation. (Romans 8:23). This is to say that as we, human beings, need salvation, liberation from sin, from oppression, from poverty, so does the whole creation, so does the Earth. The Earth is groaning for Liberation. The Earth is groaning for a Postcolonial era. And in the Congo-Zaire, the Earth is groaning for a Postcolonial Christianity that takes care of the environment.

²³⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'. Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home* (Washington, DC: United States' Bishop Conference, 2015), n. 21.

3.4.2.2. *Liberating the Earth is Liberating Humanity Itself*

I strongly believe that undertaking actions to protect the environment is part of the work of shaping a Postcolonial Christianity, moving out of the model of domination, colonization, or imperialism. That is a way of anticipating the new Creation, “New Heavens and New Earth.” (Isaiah 65: 17) In respect to that, Leonardo Boff affirms, “God did not create the universe as something completed, an event in the past. Rather, God set in motion an open process that is to journey toward ever more highly organized, subtle, and better ways of being, of life and of consciousness. The first page of Scripture is actually the last.”²⁴⁰ This is to say that the beautiful image of a paradise of peace and harmony, as described in the first chapter of Genesis, does in fact paint what the whole creation is supposed to become. This future corresponds to the fulfillment of Salvation, when God will, according to God’s plan, “recapitulate everything in Christ, things in heaven and on earth.” (Ephesians 1 :10)

Thus, what we are facing today, as challenge regarding our oppressed Earth, concerns the whole creation, and first of all human beings. It is clear for me that liberating Creation contribute to liberate Human beings who are part of this Creation, whose sustenance depends on Creation. Pope Francis shares the same conviction, as he writes, “When we speak of the ‘environment,’ what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature.”²⁴¹ As matter of consequence, the Postcolonial Christianity in the Congo will not be possible without the “Liberation of the Poor Earth.”

²⁴⁰ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 83.

²⁴¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, n. 139.

General Conclusion

The starting point of this essay was a feeling of frustration due to the experience of abject and increasing poverty in a country where Christianity flourishes in a tremendous way: the Congo-Zaire. That frustration led me to question the paradoxical reality of churches full every day with crowds dying every day from hunger, oppression, poverty. What are the sources of that paradox? And how to resolve it? These were the two major questions that guided my explorations. In other words, the aim of these pages was to understand the roots of that paradox, and to look for a way out.

To achieve that purpose, I have first described the context of the Congo-Zaire, showing how rich in natural resources the country is. Indeed, the Congo-Zaire, with its dynamic population – beside its scenic landscapes and its beautiful climate – is blessed with several rivers; with a fertile soil and a luxuriant flora; with a complex wildlife; and with a huge diversity of mineral resources. I have also briefly shown how troubled, unstable and uncertain the socio-political and economic context is today in that country. With much more details, I have described how, in that context, Christian faith is flourishing, not only in terms of numbers, but also in terms of ecclesial vitality. The Congo-Zaire knows a rich theological activity, that leads to incredible experiments, particularly in the area of liturgy. Finally, I have contrasted that religious effervescence with the reality of poverty understood not only as lack of income, but also as deprivation of capabilities. To the concept of poverty, I have also associated the reality of oppression, and the hard experience of being despoiled of one's own identity – what Cameroonian Jesuit theologian, Engelbert Mveng, calls “anthropological poverty.” Looking at the facts is not enough. So, I had to analyze the roots of that poverty. I demonstrated that the causes of poverty in the Congo-Zaire are both anthropological and structural. They are anthropological because most Congolese still bear the

weight of colonization, and the complexes of people who have been despoiled from their self-esteem, their identity, their culture. They are structural because the Congo-Zaire still functions following the economic and political models of predation and repression invented by the colonizers to impoverish and control the Congolese people. From there, I was able to look at the causes of the paradox, the causes of that dramatic reality of an increasing poverty conjugated with the stunning reality of the growth of Christianity.

To reach the root causes of the paradox, I went back to the first encounter of the Congolese peoples with Christianity. The outcome of that historical survey was that Christianity arrived in the Congo-Zaire in the same boat as the slave-traders of the fifteenth century, and later together with the colonizers of the nineteenth century. There lies the first source of the paradox: Christianity was associated to the task of conquest, exploitation and colonization of the Congo-Zaire. Missionaries were first and foremost servants of their own king. Evangelization was mixed with colonization and exploitation. Hence, the relationships established with the poor were not meant to help these latter access a better life, but rather to make them more submissive to and dependent on the religious and political authorities. That constitutes the second source of the paradox: the relations between Christianity and the poor. These relations were based on a particular teaching about salvation. And there resides the third source of the paradox. Salvation is at the heart of Christian faith. Hence, the approach to salvation determines the way people relate to earthly realities, and to the various problems they encounter, including oppression and poverty. Christianity during colonial times turned Congolese people's eyes towards Heaven, insisting on eternal life. After the independence, local Christian religious authorities tried to change the relationships with the poor. But the results are still very modest. The ties with the colonial model remain too strong. Some new religious movements brought another conception of salvation,

focusing on material wealth, and reviving the doctrine of retribution. These movements and their conception of salvation attract many people to their churches, thus contribute to more religious effervescence. Yet, they do not resolve the paradox, as they stress the individual's well-being. They forget the need to change the religious, socio-political and economic structures inherited from colonial times, and that continue to impoverish the people today. A third concept of salvation is offered but not explored enough: integral liberation. My conviction is that this concept could help the Congo-Zaire leave the colonial model, and shape a postcolonial Christianity, in order to get out of the paradox.

Ultimately, having analyzed those various roots, I was therefore able to trace the paths for a postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire. I began first by explaining the complex notion of postcolonialism. It is a set of theories and literary techniques that emerged in the 1980s, and that seek to understand the impact of colonialism on contemporary socio-political and economic structures, cultural and religious interpretations, and to reflect of the way of moving beyond colonialism. Applying this perspective to the case of the paradoxical reality of Christianity and poverty in the Congo-Zaire, I came up with the conclusion that Christianity in the Congo-Zaire needs to move out of the colonial model, first of all by committing itself in the re-appropriation of the African way of life. This is to say that there is a need of re-appropriating the values of the autochthonous. But that re-appropriation must be critical. That is why I examined the main features of the African way of life that can help alleviate poverty, as well as those carrying the germ of poverty. The example of the re-appropriation by the Kimbanguist church of the value of solidarity, *kintwadi* has been used in that perspective. Secondly, in the perspective of integral liberation, postcolonial Christianity should be rooted in the preferential option for the poor which is central to the teaching and life of Jesus Christ, as Scriptures show. In the context of Congo-Zaire, that

preferential option for the poor implies letting the Congolese get conscious of their anthropological impoverishment, and of their potentialities and capabilities. That will allow them to become agents of the transformation of the socio-political, economic and religious structures that oppress them. The preferential option for the poor in the Congo-Zaire also means especially empowering women, given that they are the poorest of the poor. More than men, they are victims of discrimination, injustices and violence. Empowering them does not mean doing things for her, but rather encourage their initiative, leave them a space of expression and action. Given their role as primary educator in the Congolese society, empowering women is essential to empowering the whole society. That is what the example of Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai demonstrates. Finally, the preferential option for the poor in the Congo-Zaire does also mean a particular care for the earth. Indeed, poverty in the Congo-Zaire is deeply related to the exploitation of resources, especially mineral resources. Many violence, wars and diseases are the consequence of bad use of natural resources. Therefore, postcolonial Christianity in the Congo-Zaire should advocate and work hard to promote the care for the earth and for the people whose life depends entirely on that earth.

In sum, in this essay, I have suggested a way to resolve the paradox of Christianity and poverty in the Congo-Zaire: to move towards a postcolonial Christianity informed by the African way of life and rooted in the preferential option for the poor. The realities of the Congo-Zaire match those of most sub-Saharan African countries, and even non-African countries. Therefore, the perspective of postcolonial Christianity can be adapted to their particular contexts. Ultimately, I am convinced that the way I have suggested here will be enriched by the dialogue with different attempts to move towards postcolonial Christianity in other contexts.

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