



Faith, Culture, and Social Transformation: Theology in the Context of Liberia

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Abstract

Theology in Liberia occupies a distinctive position where Christian traditions, African cultural heritage, and the pressing realities of social and political transformation intersect. In a nation that has endured prolonged civil conflict and continues to grapple with systemic poverty, corruption, fragile governance, and deep social fragmentation, theology cannot be confined to abstract doctrinal concerns; it emerges as a vital instrument for reconstruction, reconciliation, and renewal. This paper explores the historical trajectory of theology in Liberia, tracing how early missionary influences, indigenous cultural practices, and local religious creativity have interacted to shape the theological landscape. It also investigates the complex role of theology in addressing the legacies of war, displacement, trauma, and communal disintegration, while assessing its engagement with contemporary struggles for justice, accountability, and nation-building. The study argues that although Christianity has grown significantly in Liberia, theological discourse has often remained disconnected from socio-political realities and indigenous cultural frameworks, creating a gap in its relevance to everyday life. This paper seeks to fill that gap by re-examining theology not merely as a body of doctrines but as a praxis-oriented discipline that critically engages culture, confronts corruption and injustice, and fosters holistic transformation. Drawing on contextual theological scholarship, ethnographic insights, and interdisciplinary perspectives, the paper highlights theology's potential to function as a catalyst for ethical reflection, poverty alleviation, trauma healing, interfaith dialogue, and the restoration of communal solidarity. The central argument advanced is that theology in Liberia must reclaim its contextual and transformation character by grounding itself in the lived realities of the people. In doing so, it affirms cultural identity, promotes reconciliation, and contributes meaningfully to sustainable peace and development. Such an approach positions theology not as foreign or abstract, but as an indispensable force for justice, peace, and social transformation in Liberia's ongoing journey of healing and nation-building.

Keywords: *Theology, Liberia, Culture, Praxis, Social Transformation, Reconciliation, Nation-building*

1.Introduction

Liberia, Africa's oldest republic, presents a unique setting where faith, culture, and politics intersect in complex and dynamic ways. Established in the nineteenth century as a settlement for freed African Americans, Liberia's national identity has been shaped by both Western influences and rich indigenous traditions. Christianity, introduced through missionary activity, quickly became a dominant force in the social, cultural, and political fabric of the country. Yet its presence did not erase indigenous worldviews; rather, it created a contested but fertile space where theological expression often reflected a negotiation between imported doctrines and local cultural values.

During the decades of civil unrest and political instability that plagued the nation, theology functioned in multiple ways: at times legitimizing oppressive regimes, and at other times serving as a prophetic voice against injustice. In post-conflict Liberia, theology continues to carry the burden of addressing communal trauma, rebuilding fractured identities, and nurturing a vision of justice and peace. This paper argues that theology in Liberia should not remain abstract or doctrinally confined but should actively engage the realities of poverty, corruption, and social disintegration. By situating theology at the intersection of faith, culture, and socio-political realities, the study highlights its potential as a transformative force for reconciliation, healing, and sustainable development.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Liberian context is profoundly shaped by a long and complex history that continues to influence its contemporary religious, cultural, and political life. From the colonial encounters of the nineteenth century, through the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, to the devastating years of civil war, the country's identity has been marked by tension, negotiation, and resilience.

Liberia, founded as a settlement for freed African Americans in 1822 under the auspices of the American Colonization Society, embodied a unique fusion of Western and African experiences. The settlers, known as Americo-Liberians, established political and religious structures modeled on the United States, yet these often existed in tension with the indigenous peoples and their traditional systems of governance and spirituality (Levitt, 2005).

Religion has played a central role throughout this historical trajectory. Christianity, in particular, became deeply embedded in public life, shaping both national identity and political legitimacy.

The arrival of missionaries in the nineteenth century brought with it Western theological frameworks that frequently conflicted with indigenous cosmologies, ritual practices, and communal ethics (Sanneh, 2009). These frameworks often attempted to dismiss or replace

African religious traditions, viewing them as incompatible with Christian orthodoxy. Yet, rather than being passive recipients of missionary religion, Liberians creatively reinterpreted and reappropriated Christian teachings. They wove them together with cultural symbols, values, and practices that resonated with their African heritage, resulting in a theological identity that was both Christian and distinctly Liberian (Bediako, 1995; Magesa, 1997).

This hybridity became even more pronounced in the context of the nation's political and social struggles. During the two civil wars between 1989 and 2003, which left over 250,000 people dead and countless communities destroyed, churches became sites of both complicity and resistance. Some religious leaders aligned themselves with political elites, offering legitimacy to oppressive systems, while others used theology as a prophetic voice to challenge injustice and call for peace (Gifford, 2015). These conflicts left deep scars on Liberia's social and political fabric, producing widespread trauma, economic decline, and a breakdown of communal trust. In the aftermath of war, theology has increasingly been called upon to respond to pressing realities. Issues such as poverty, unemployment, economic inequality, corruption, political exclusion, gender-based violence, and fractured communal relationships remain central to Liberia's post-conflict recovery. Theological reflection in this setting cannot afford to remain disengaged from the lived experiences of ordinary people, nor can it limit itself to abstract doctrinal formulations disconnected from social realities. Instead, there is a growing need for contextual theology an approach that integrates faith with culture and engages practical strategies for healing, justice, and nation-building (Katongole, 2017).

Such contextual engagement situates theology not only as a spiritual resource but also as a sociopolitical tool for transformation. By addressing trauma, fostering reconciliation, affirming cultural identity, and promoting ethical governance, theology in Liberia holds the potential to contribute meaningfully to the country's reconstruction. The background of this study, therefore, highlights both the historical tensions and the contemporary opportunities that make theology in Liberia an urgent and relevant field of inquiry.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Christianity has grown widely in Liberia and continues to shape public life, yet theological discourse has often remained disengaged from the nation's most pressing socio-economic and political realities. Churches frequently emphasize personal spiritual salvation while overlooking broader societal concerns such as poverty, governance, justice, and reconciliation. This has created a theological gap where faith is seen as detached from everyday struggles, thereby limiting its capacity to bring about holistic transformation.

At the same time, indigenous cultural practices and worldviews continue to influence how Liberians live, believe, and interact. However, these cultural dimensions are often ignored, dismissed, or inadequately engaged in theological reflection. This neglect not only weakens the relevance of theology but also risks portraying it as foreign, abstract, and disconnected from local realities.

The motivation for this study arises from the urgent need to reclaim theology in Liberia as a lived, praxis-oriented discipline that speaks directly to the socio-political and cultural challenges of the nation. By bridging the gap between faith and public life, and by integrating local cultural insights into theological discourse, this paper seeks to reposition theology as a transformative force that confronts corruption, promotes justice, nurtures reconciliation, and contributes meaningfully to nation-building.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How can theology in Liberia, shaped by its historical intersections with culture and politics, effectively respond to post-conflict challenges and contribute to social transformation?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of African theology has been profoundly influenced by the tension between Western missionary Christianity and indigenous cultural frameworks. Early missionary encounters often dismissed African traditional religions as superstitious, backward, or even demonic, imposing theological categories that were foreign to African cosmologies (Sanneh, 2009). This created a theological dissonance in which many African converts were compelled to abandon their cultural practices in order to conform to Western models of Christianity. Over time, however, African theologians began to resist such impositions, insisting that the Christian faith must be authentically grounded in African cultural and spiritual realities in order to be meaningful to local communities. Kwame Bediako (1995) emphasizes that African theology cannot thrive if it remains detached from the continuity of indigenous heritage, arguing that African religious consciousness is not an obstacle but rather a resource for Christian identity. Similarly, John Mbiti (1991) affirms that African religiosity provides the conceptual categories through which Africans interpret the Christian message, shaping their understanding of God, humanity, and community.

This process of contextualization often leads to what scholars describe as syncretism, where Christian practices are integrated with traditional rituals, music, drumming, proverbs, and healing ceremonies (Gifford, 2002). In Liberia, syncretism has become a defining feature of Christian worship and spirituality. The incorporation of traditional songs and rhythms in liturgy,

the adaptation of indigenous healing practices into Christian prayer services, and the persistence of cultural rituals around death, marriage, and initiation demonstrate the resilience of cultural identity and the adaptability of theology to local realities. This dynamic interaction between inherited Western forms and indigenous cultural expressions highlights the creativity of Liberian Christianity, but it also raises questions about the boundaries of orthodoxy and the legitimacy of theological innovation.

Theological developments in Liberia cannot be understood apart from political contexts.

Emmanuel D. Doe (1992) observes that churches in Liberia have historically oscillated between complicity with political powers and prophetic witness against injustice. This dual role became particularly evident during the Liberian civil wars that ravaged the country between 1989 and 2003. While some religious leaders aligned themselves with political elites and provided theological legitimacy to violence and authoritarianism, others rose as advocates for peace, justice, and reconciliation (Kelsall, 2008). The willingness of certain church leaders to legitimize armed conflict revealed the vulnerability of theology to political manipulation, while the courage of others to resist oppression demonstrated the prophetic potential of Christianity when it aligns with the pursuit of truth and justice. This ambivalence underscores the complex role of theology in shaping public life, as it can be both a tool of oppression and a source of liberation.

In the post-conflict era, African theology has increasingly turned its attention to reconciliation, healing, and the rebuilding of social trust in societies scarred by violence. Emmanuel Katongole (2011) argues that theology in conflict-affected contexts must prioritize lament, memory, and hope. Lament acknowledges the deep pain of brokenness and suffering, memory safeguards the truth of past injustices from denial or distortion, and hope inspires communities to envision new possibilities of peace, restoration, and justice. In Liberia, churches have been at the forefront of trauma healing initiatives, reconciliation workshops, and community rebuilding projects.

Through liturgy, preaching, and pastoral counseling, they have offered spaces of healing and restoration for individuals and families traumatized by war. However, as scholars have noted, theological reflection often lags behind practical ministry. While churches engage in healing practices, there is still a pressing need for a systematic theology that can articulate the spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions of reconciliation in the Liberian context.

Scholars such as Harry Sawyerr (1987) have long insisted that African theology must move beyond a narrow focus on individual spirituality and address the broader structural injustices that perpetuate suffering. In the Liberian case, this includes confronting systemic corruption, economic inequality, and the failures of governance that continue to undermine peace and

development. A theology that merely consoles the afflicted without challenging the conditions that produce affliction risks becoming complicit in oppression. Instead, what is required is a practical and socially engaged theology that not only attends to the spiritual needs of individuals but also mobilizes faith communities toward ethical leadership, civic responsibility, and social transformation.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that theology in Liberia cannot be separated from the cultural and political realities that shape its practice. It must continually navigate the tension between Western theological categories and indigenous religious heritage, between complicity with power and prophetic resistance, and between offering spiritual consolation and advocating for structural transformation. Scholars affirm the need for a praxis-oriented theology in Liberia one that integrates faith, culture, and social realities in order to promote justice, healing, reconciliation, and nation-building (Bediako, 1995; Mbiti, 1991; Katongole, 2011; Sawyerr, 1987). Such a theology has the potential to contribute not only to the renewal of the Liberian church but also to the moral and political reconstruction of Liberian society.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative critical ethnographic design, a methodological approach particularly well suited for exploring the lived realities of faith communities within their cultural and socio-political contexts. Ethnography seeks to understand practices and beliefs from the perspective of community members, capturing the everyday interactions that shape meaning (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). A critical ethnographic orientation extends beyond description by interrogating issues of power, inequality, and transformation (Madison, 2011). In the Liberian context, where religion, politics, and culture are deeply intertwined, this methodology provides a lens for uncovering both the explicit theological expressions articulated in sermons and church documents and the implicit meanings embedded in worship, ritual, and communal practices. By situating theology within lived experiences, the study emphasizes praxis over abstraction, echoing Osmer's (2008) call for theology that is descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic.

3.1 Sampling and Participants

The study employed purposive sampling, a strategy that intentionally selects participants who can provide rich and relevant data for the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thirty participants were engaged in total, ensuring a balanced representation of voices within the Liberian church landscape. These included ordained clergy, lay leaders, women's fellowship leaders, youth representatives, and ordinary congregants whose perspectives shed light on the

grassroots understanding of theology. To reflect the diversity of Liberian Christianity, the sample was drawn from three urban churches in Monrovia, representing established Protestant and Pentecostal traditions, and two rural communities, where syncretic expressions of faith and indigenous traditions remain prominent. This urban rural comparison provided a nuanced understanding of how theology is articulated and practiced in differing contexts, highlighting both continuity and divergence in theological discourse and worship practices.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary methods to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of findings (Patton, 2015).

Participant observation involved attending worship services, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and community outreach programs. Field notes documented the integration of cultural symbols such as drumming, dance, proverbs, and healing rituals, which offered insight into the lived expressions of contextual theology. Observation allowed the researcher to experience worship practices as embodied theology, capturing non-verbal forms of meaning making that are often absent from written texts.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with both clergy and congregants, exploring perceptions of theology, culture, and social transformation. Open ended questions invited participants to reflect on their experiences of faith in relation to pressing social issues such as poverty, corruption, reconciliation, and nation building. The flexibility of semi structured interviews allowed for follow up questions and emergent themes, ensuring that participants' voices shaped the direction of inquiry (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Document analysis complemented field observations and interviews. Sermons, denominational constitutions, theological writings, and policy documents from church bodies were analyzed to provide insights into formal theological discourses, institutional priorities, and the ways churches attempt to frame their role in Liberia's post conflict reconstruction.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and concepts across the collected data. Analysis was guided by Osmer's (2008) four tasks of practical theology, which provided a structured yet flexible interpretive framework.

The descriptive empirical task focused on identifying what was happening within Liberian churches, particularly the integration of indigenous practices and the discourse surrounding social transformation. The interpretive task explored why these practices emerged in the ways they did, with attention to Liberia's history of colonization, civil war, and post conflict

rebuilding. The normative task engaged theological and ethical resources, both biblical and African theological scholarship, to evaluate current practices and to propose constructive alternatives. The pragmatic task suggested strategies for how theology could more effectively contribute to transformation, reconciliation, and nation building in Liberia.

This layered analysis ensured that the study was not only descriptive but also interpretive and constructive, linking empirical findings with theological reflection.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of discussing religion, culture, and politics in a society emerging from conflict, the study was guided by strict ethical principles. All participants provided informed consent, and the researcher explained the purpose of the study and participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, with pseudonyms used in reporting data to protect participants' identities. Special care was taken to approach communities with cultural sensitivity and humility, respecting local customs and values. Theological critique was carefully balanced with an affirmation of indigenous wisdom to avoid reproducing colonial patterns of dismissing African religiosity. This ethical posture aligns with best practices in ethnographic research, which emphasize relational accountability and respect for participants' dignity (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

4. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Liberian theology is deeply contextual, reflecting both the scars of the nation's violent history and the resilience of its faith communities. Worship practices remain a primary site where theology is expressed and embodied. Participant observation highlighted the use of drumming, dancing, call-and-response singing, healing prayers, and storytelling as central features of worship. These practices are not merely cultural adornments but serve as resilience mechanisms in a society scarred by war. They carry profound theological meaning, affirming God's presence in suffering and celebrating survival and communal solidarity. In this sense, theology in Liberia emerges as lived and embodied rather than confined to doctrinal formulations.

Theological discourses in sermons and church documents often oscillate between Western doctrinal emphases and contextual realities. On one hand, clergy and leaders frequently draw upon inherited Protestant and Pentecostal frameworks shaped by Western missionaries. On the other, there is a growing recognition that these frameworks must be reinterpreted in light of the socio-political realities of Liberia. Interviews with clergy confirmed an emerging consensus on the need for theology that directly addresses pressing issues such as poverty, corruption,

governance, and post-conflict trauma. This aligns with African theologians' call for a shift from abstract theorizing to praxis-oriented theology that speaks to the lived realities of African communities.

Congregants, as reflected in interviews and focus groups, consistently perceive theology not as an abstract body of doctrine but as a lived practice that must respond to daily struggles. For many, theology becomes tangible when churches engage in social programs such as education, microfinance, health outreach, and reconciliation initiatives. Such practices are widely perceived as embodying a theology of transformation, where faith becomes inseparable from the pursuit of justice, dignity, and community healing. In contrast, congregants expressed ambivalence toward prosperity gospel movements, which prioritize individual success, wealth accumulation, and material blessing. While these movements offer hope for personal advancement, they are often criticized for neglecting communal responsibility and structural issues of justice. The tension between prosperity-oriented theologies and liberation-oriented theologies remains one of the most significant theological debates in Liberia today.

The thematic analysis further underscores the transformative potential of theology when it reclaims indigenous wisdom and integrates it with biblical and ethical resources. Indigenous practices such as communal meals, proverbs, and reconciliation rituals, when framed theologically, can contribute to nation-building and healing fractured relationships. Clergy and lay leaders highlighted the importance of using theology as a tool for ethical formation, particularly in addressing corruption and cultivating integrity in leadership. Sermons that emphasize stewardship, accountability, and collective responsibility were observed to resonate strongly with congregants, suggesting that theology can shape moral imagination in ways that contribute to societal reform.

At the same time, the data reveal ongoing challenges. Theological discourses risk remaining fragmented between imported Western traditions and emerging contextual voices. Some church leaders resist engaging in socio-political issues, fearing that such engagement may politicize the church or invite state backlash. Others struggle with balancing spiritual ministries with social action, particularly in resource-limited rural contexts. These tensions reflect broader debates within global Christianity on the role of theology in public life.

Taken together, the findings suggest that contextual theology in Liberia is not a detached academic exercise but a resource for transformation, reconciliation, and nation-building. By integrating indigenous cultural resources, addressing systemic corruption through ethical formation, and promoting reconciliation through inclusive rituals, Liberian theology

demonstrates its capacity to bridge the gap between faith and public life. In this way, theology functions both as a source of personal spiritual nourishment and as a communal framework for healing, justice, and hope in a post-conflict society.

5. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

This study has demonstrated that theology in Liberia is shaped by a dynamic and ongoing interplay of faith, culture, and socio-political realities. Historically, Liberian Christianity was heavily influenced by Western missionary models, which introduced formal doctrines and institutional structures but often marginalized local cultural expressions (Bediako, 1995; Mbiti, 1991). Over time, and especially in the aftermath of prolonged civil conflict, there has been a notable shift toward theological expressions that integrate indigenous cultural elements such as drumming, proverbs, storytelling, and healing rituals. These practices serve not only as cultural continuity but also as mechanisms of resilience, identity formation, and spiritual healing.

The post-conflict realities of Liberia demand a theology that is both contextual and praxis-oriented. Interviews and observations revealed that congregants expect theology to address immediate and pressing realities such as poverty, corruption, trauma, and reconciliation.

Churches that actively engage in social programs and promote reconciliation are perceived as embodying authentic theology, while those limited to abstract doctrinal teaching risk irrelevance in the lived experiences of their members. The study thus affirms that theology in Liberia is not static but an evolving discourse shaped by historical legacies, cultural dynamics, and socio-political challenges.

5.2 Conclusion

The findings point to the need for reimagining theology in Liberia as more than a doctrinal or intellectual system. Theology must be understood as a lived praxis that engages cultural heritage, addresses trauma, and promotes holistic social transformation (Katongole, 2011). Such an approach requires moving beyond abstract theological formulations inherited from missionary traditions and toward a contextual theology that affirms indigenous wisdom, speaks into everyday struggles, and offers a moral and spiritual framework for national renewal.

In this sense, Liberian theology holds transformative potential. When rooted in both the Christian gospel and African cultural resources, it can contribute meaningfully to reconciliation among divided communities, to ethical governance in the face of corruption, and to sustainable nation-building in a fragile state. Theology in Liberia, therefore, should not be dismissed as merely a

religious discourse but recognized as a vital partner in shaping the moral imagination of society and fostering resilience in post-conflict contexts.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are made for churches, theological institutions, policymakers, and scholars.

For churches, there is an urgent need to embrace contextual theologies that recognize culture not as an obstacle but as a resource for pastoral care, reconciliation, and nation-building. Worship practices and community programs should intentionally integrate indigenous cultural expressions in ways that affirm local identity while fostering spiritual transformation.

For theological institutions, curricula should be restructured to include courses on African traditional religions, contextual theology, and practical approaches to post-conflict ministry. By preparing leaders who are both theologically grounded and culturally sensitive, seminaries and universities can equip future clergy to respond effectively to the challenges of poverty, corruption, and trauma in Liberia.

For policymakers, collaboration with faith communities should be strengthened. Churches remain influential social actors, and their involvement in governance, peacebuilding, and community healing can enhance policy outcomes. Incorporating indigenous wisdom into reconciliation processes and nation-building initiatives can foster legitimacy, inclusivity, and long-term stability.

For scholars, further ethnographic and comparative studies on theology in post-conflict African societies are recommended. Such research would deepen understanding of the complex interplay between faith, culture, and social transformation, offering insights not only for Liberia but also for other contexts facing similar challenges of reconciliation, governance, and sustainable development.

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