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# God and Development: Doxology in African Christianity

by Gregg Okesson

## Abstract

*This article draws connections between doxology in the churches and development in Africa. It argues that while Western scholars often hesitate in making direct linkages between theology and development activity, the same is not the case within African Christianity, where the churches possess ample resources in the form of “praise poetry” for navigating the vicissitudes of life. The article suggests that more research is needed to study the kind of doxology generated by the churches for strengthening development activity on the continent.*

## Introduction

What does “God” have to do with development? This essay explores how doxological affirmations about the divine help shape the cosmology of a people with regard to progress. In one sense, the field of development studies has slowly begun acknowledging such things, with a growing number of scholars examining the importance of religion related to development concerns.<sup>1</sup> Some of this might be in reaction to earlier epochs that saw spirituality in direct contrast to enlightened rationality, or else driven by a growing awareness of religiosity in the lives of people in the Majority World. But despite any optimism with regard to religion, most scholars still hesitate on more overt theological matters, perhaps believing that theology carries with it incontrovertible partisan bias.

But if religion makes a difference in our world, why not theology? Does belief in God make any difference in how people view the world? Or the nature of God for how they seek to improve their lives? Western modernity has borne an ambiguous history with regard to belief about God; at once dependent upon the Judeo-Christian heritage for much of its implicit sub-structure and values, while suspicious of spiritual forces impeding human agency. Meanwhile disagreements between religions have sadly fueled violent conflicts, leading development scholars to opt for a neutral perspective on religion, almost positing a theology-less stance with regard to religion. But this begs the

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<sup>1</sup> See Barbara Bompani and Maria Frahm-Arp (eds.) *Development and Politics from Below: Exploring Religious Spaces in the African State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Erica Bornstein, *The Spirit of Development: Protestant NGO's, Morality, and Economics in Zimbabwe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Gerrie Ter Haar, *Religion and Development: Ways of Transforming the World* (Columbia University Press, 2011); or, Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *Spiritual Capital: Wealth We Can Live By* (London: Berrett-Kohler, 2004).

question: is it possible to posit religious belief without confessional bias? All around the world, religious adherents finger prayer beads, recounting the names of God for everyday life. Meanwhile, churches, mosques, and temples provide sacred space for supplications and teachings with regard to God.

Admittedly, confessional beliefs have nursed a host of conflict around the world. A recent Pew Forum study chronicles the rise in religiously motivated violence to 33% within the 198 countries studied.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes people kill each other in the name of God; whereas at other times sacred speech sanctions oppressive regimes.<sup>3</sup> Without a doubt, theological resources can be both problem and solution. But none of this discounts the importance of God. While scholars in the West think of God as a restricted category, the divine provides people around the world with valuable resources to function as fruitful agents in society.

### Where is God in Development?

As Christianity expands around the world at a meteoric rate, theological topics will increasingly be important for examining global problems. From the proliferation of Pentecostalism in the Global South to the emergence of transnational churches in the Northern Hemisphere, people source what is important to them via religious domains. This is especially true for Africa, where the invisible realm touches upon all facets of life.<sup>4</sup>

While secular scholars struggle with the role of God with regard to development, the situation is only slightly different for Christian scholars. From the rise of evangelicalism<sup>5</sup> to later discussions prompted by the Latin American contingent at the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism, to collaborative efforts within the Wheaton consultation in 1983,<sup>6</sup> and culminating,

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research: Religion and Public Life Project, "Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High," <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/> accessed on February 26, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See Achille Mbembe, "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony," Translated by Janet Roitman. *Public Culture* 4:2 (1992), 1–30; Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya* (London: Hurst, 2009); and Celistin Monga, *The Anthropology of Anger: Civil Society and Democracy in Africa*. Translated by Linda L. Fleck and Celistin Monga (London: Lynne Rienner, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> From its beginnings, evangelicalism contained seeds of social action; see David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989); or, Donald D. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*. Reprint Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> "Transformation: The Church in Response to Human Need," Wheaton, IL: Wheaton College, June 1983. See, <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/all/consultation-statements/423-transformation-the-church-in-response-to-human-need.html>. Accessed March 22, 2013.

at least in the eyes of many, with Bryant Myers' book, *Walking with the Poor*,<sup>7</sup> the focus for evangelicals has revolved around God's purposes for the world. Scholars of "transformational development" or "integral mission" repeatedly refer to God's intentions. They talk about "Shalom" as a state of affairs in the world, or they mention divine intent. Some even refer to a "biblical basis for holistic ministry," but fail to go into detail about the One who began it all. They speak of humans as the "image of God," but overlook the One they image. Some of the writings do refer to God's character. The Wheaton affirmation states, "He is the ruler of the kings of the earth (Rev. 1:5), King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16)," or refers to Christ taking up God's purposes in redemption, or the Holy Spirit as "the Transformer, *par excellence*." Myers' book expands upon these themes. He states up front, "Who is God? must be the first question,"<sup>8</sup> and briefly talks about the importance of a Trinitarian understanding.<sup>9</sup> But despite his desire to situate transformational development upon such a foundation, Myers says very little about God's nature and devotes the majority of his book to any implications for development.

At one level, none of this should come as much surprise. It may be argued that Western societies have witnessed a weakening of the concept of the divine over the last millennium. Thomas Jenkins notes that contrary to earlier epochs, late nineteenth century Protestant theology lost much of its ability to master the complexity of God's nature, lapsing into reductionistic views of the divine that saw "God as an emotionally singular character, having one predominant feeling, such as serene benevolence, holiness, or tender sympathy."<sup>10</sup> Whether Jenkins accurately reads the situation may be open for debate, but certainly the paucity of material dealing with God in the writings of Christian development lends some credence to his thesis. He later explores the social gospel movement in the middle of the twentieth century and berates liberals and conservatives alike for deficiencies in dealing with God's nature. Regarding the latter, Jenkins says, "Conservatives tried to look beyond the earthly God and 'desire ... God himself.' There was a problem with this, however. The desire might be there, but the object of this desire had become vague."<sup>11</sup>

If one compares the contemporary scene with previous eras (like those of Luther, Calvin, Edwards, or Wesley), one could certainly make the case that

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<sup>7</sup> Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Revised and Expanded Edition. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011). For a helpful overview of the historical period just discussed, see Al Tizon, *Transformation after Lausanne: Radical Evangelical Mission in Global-Local Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Regnum Studies in Mission, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, pp. 59ff., 84ff.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Jenkins, *The Character of God: Recovering the Lost Literary Power of American Protestantism*. (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, *The Character of God*, p. 79.

Western societies have lost their ability to talk about God with a textured richness. Could it be that years of defending God against liberals, or laboring amidst forces of modernity, have somehow stripped evangelicals of their theological resources, forcing “God” into a distinct, rationalistic realm, or else stunted their theological imagination? Or have Christians implicitly accepted doxology as a thing of no worldly significance, ignoring the confessional resources of billions of people around the world without a second glance?

While Western societies labor under an anemic view of God, the case is strikingly different for African Christianity, where ironically much development work takes place. In the churches, one finds a litany of titles for the divine flooding the content of every service. People pray, sing, dance, and proclaim the names of God. Parishioners shout ascriptions or generate “praise poetry” to move in and out of contact with the divine. God is lauded as King, Savior, Lord, Friend of Sinners, Alpha and Omega, Jehovah, or Almighty. Songs attest to the indisputable uniqueness of God (*hakuna Mungu kama wewe*, “there is no God like you”), interweaving praise throughout the entire service in order to locate God in the midst of life. Thus, confessed beliefs bid the parishioner enter an imaginative realm where God pervades all “spaces” of the cosmos, helping connect doxology with everyday life.

In this essay, I take up linkages between God and the world. The paper begins with some theological foundations to underscore the importance of God for the world, and then explores the sociological significance of “God.” Next, I delve into various aspects of doxology within African Christianity where parishioners boast imaginative resources for conceptualizing the divine in the face of societal decay. This article argues that what you believe about God directly impacts how you function in society. Or, stated in another way, if humans are the “image of God,” this says something significant for the One they image, with direct implications for how they engage the world.

### **God and Development: Biblical Foundations**

In the beginning, God. The opening words of Scripture immediately direct us toward all that is important in the world and hint at the impetus for Creation. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dance to the music of inward song. A laugh, and the heavens come into being; a smile, and the earth takes form. The inexhaustible creativity of the Triune Community spills over into matter, making visible that which only glimmered in the eye of divine intent. God speaks and the heavens pulsate with joy. Under the faint whisper of his breath, the earth blossoms into life.

Into such an arena of imaginative, world-defining acclaim, God fashions humans as the “image of God,” charged with responsibility (and commensurate powers) for nurturing life. Hence, God is never far from human

identity. The gaze of humans beholds the face of God.<sup>12</sup> Therein they find themselves, not as replacements of God, nor as pre-fabricated molds, but as living beings who function in the world by faithful “imaging.”

When sin enters the story, it does more than affect the individual properties of creation. It also distorts the cohesion, the dignity, and most strategically (for our purposes here), the fundamental “imaging” of God. In wanting to become like God, humans become less than they were intended to be, scorning the gift and abusing the power. They turn inward, esteeming the creation rather than the Creator. Praise warps into idolatry. Creative acts destroy. Domination, exploitation, sacralization, and marginalization become common themes in human communities, affecting how people interact with the rest of the world. Fear, insecurity, and self-abasement follow, where humanity twists and contorts at the distortion of God’s nature.<sup>13</sup>

However, the world remains inextricably linked with the knowledge of God. At one moment, “I am that I am” speaks to Moses from a burning bush, leading to the overthrow of Pharaoh’s empire and giving rise to the slow and gradual formation of the People of God, while at the next, “the Word becomes flesh” where history shifts upon its axis, resulting in the emergence of a new humanity. In the Old Testament, heaven and earth serve as witnesses of the covenant (Deut 30:19-20; c.f. 31:28) and in the New, all creation groans, waiting in “eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (Rom 8:19). Thus, direct linkages exist between creation, humans, and recreation, through the character of God.<sup>14</sup> Development work, at least in part, pertains to faithfulness in human “imaging,” requiring greater attention to the source of the image: God.

Biblical writers describe with elaborate language and dramatize with vivid imagination the many facets of God’s infinite character. He is the Almighty, Ancient of Days, Eternal God, Fountain of Living Waters, Judge, King, and Sun of Righteousness. What is more, these characteristics remain open to the world, never restricted to the dim lighting of a quiet, comfortable study, but serve as beacons that light up the sky at night (or a city on a hill).<sup>15</sup> Yahweh

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<sup>12</sup> Or as Calvin states, “man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.” *Institutes* I, 1, 2.

<sup>13</sup> G. Okesson, *Re-Imaging Modernity: a contextualized theological study of power and humanity within Akamba Christianity in Kenya* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), p. 188.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the importance of creation in God’s purposes, see Howard Snyder and Joel Scandrett, *Creation Means Salvation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> John Wesley says, “God is in all things, and ... we are to see the Creator in the [mirror] of every creature; ... we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism; but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the

reveals himself. Such was the prophets' delight. Jeremiah feasts upon God's nature (15:16), while Ezekiel swallows the Law (3:1ff). Yet lest humans try to control this deity, God reveals and God hides. At one moment, he has no name, and at the next, he reveals himself through the incarnation.

None of this should reduce God to revolutionary intent, hijacking the divine for political gain, or positing some kind of Prosperity Gospel, but neither ought we sing praises to the One who rules the heavens, and continue with our privatized, compartmentalized existence, as if assuming that God's attributes remain restricted to the walls of the church, or are emasculated in the face of sociological significance. Ascriptions do not sit idle, hanging lifeless like little ornaments on a tree: beautiful to behold, but fragile to the touch, lacking anything but comeliness. Rather God shares his nature with the world and receives back through doxology. In the process, the heavens and earth lean forward to the praise of the One who sustains "all things by his powerful word" (Heb 1:3).

### **God and Development: From Theology to Sociology**

Throughout history, deviant beliefs about God have fed a variety of views on human agency, whether Gnosticism, with its privileging of the spiritual over the material, providing motivation for human responsiveness, albeit by taking short cuts around the created order, or Deism, which begins with God but then pushes him to the edges of the known universe, positing a cosmos free from divine interference. These deviant beliefs (and many others) lend humans agency in relation to an ambiguous world. However, they are but shadows of the true reality. The knowledge of God provides the necessary structure and order for creation, but humans have for centuries manipulated the divine for their own purposes.

Western evangelicalism arose from an ambiguous heritage. In part, it was sourced from the Enlightenment and "disenchanted" views of the world. While evangelicals have rarely held these beliefs overtly, they have at times demythologized the world with regard to spiritual powers, opting for a more causal view of cosmology that seeks solutions to human problems based solely upon science or agriculture. Furthermore, the Enlightenment project tended to carve up the world into categories, bifurcating spiritual and material elements into carefully compartmentalized boxes with limited access between the two. One result of this has been that "God" remains cloistered from the material aspects of life. But evangelicals have likewise been influenced by

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hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe." John Wesley, Sermon on the Mount 23, "Upon the Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse III, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-23-upon-our-lords-sermon-on-the-mount-discourse-three/>, accessed on March 3, 2014.

pietism, coming out of the Protestant Reformation. This at times has led to subtle, neo-gnostic views, where the entire goal of human life is to leave the world and escape to a future, spiritual state. What matters is the spiritual, not the material. And so, evangelicals have historically engaged in development with a combination of pietistic spirituality and Enlightenment materiality, but are often uncertain how to connect the two. Caught in the webs of its historical and cultural traditions, Western agents have often struggled to see the viability of theology for everyday life.

Yet there is hope. Walter Brueggemann's study on the *Prophetic Imagination* provides a bold connection between theological and sociological realities, re-establishing the importance of God for society. He explains the central importance of Yahweh in the Old Testament, saying: "We are indeed made in the image of some God. And perhaps we have no more important theological investigation than to discern in whose image we have been made."<sup>16</sup> Such an affirmation frames much of this article. If humans are created in the "image of God," then we must consider the One we image. Or, as Brueggemann puts it: "Our sociology is predictably derived from, legitimated by, and reflective of our theology."<sup>17</sup>

In order to show this to be the case, Brueggemann brings together several elements alluded to earlier in this paper: God, doxology, and a theological imagination. He narrates the beginning of Israel. With God's self-disclosure ("I am who I am") Israel commences the slow and gradual steps toward nationhood. As they reflect upon Yahweh, they become a people. And through the process of being set free from the Egyptians, they sing and dance.<sup>18</sup> The doxology of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15 shows this to be the case. The song begins with various ascriptions to Yahweh, lauding Him as "strength and defense" (v. 2), "warrior" (v. 3), "majestic in power" (v. 6) and "awesome in glory" (v. 11) and then proceeds to look toward the future: "the nations will hear and tremble," and "You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established" (v. 17). Doxology provides the means for the Israelites to imagine a new life, far away from Pharaoh's dominion. But song and dance also allow Israel to re-imagine the world around God's character. As they move to Mount Sinai, Yahweh becomes crystallized into sociological realities. Yahweh is sung. Yahweh is imagined. As these things take place, the nation of Israel comes into being.

Jürgen Moltmann provides another perspective on the matter. In *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, he devotes an entire chapter to tracing the social importance of the Trinity. He explains that what you believe about God has

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<sup>16</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. Second Edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 18.

direct bearing upon how you order your world.<sup>19</sup> In order to show this to be the case, Moltmann begins with two contrasting views of God, one that maintains God as a singular, monarchical ruler, and another where the Trinity is embraced within unity (what he calls “trinity”). He then articulates the sociological significance of these two positions, especially in the context of doxology. In regard to the former, Moltmann argues that a predilection toward a singular, monarchical God “provides the justification for earthly domination – religious, moral, patriarchal or political domination – and makes it a hierarchy, a ‘holy rule.’”<sup>20</sup> Kingship sanctions kingship. But Moltmann offers another option, within a more communal, generative picture of the Godhead, where the Persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – share freely amongst themselves in eternal love, with implications for a fundamentally different kind of sociological reality: a “community of men and women without supremacy and without subjection.”<sup>21</sup>

By espousing this view of Triunity, Moltmann is not arguing against God’s kingship, but asking deeper questions about how humans understand divine sovereignty and what this might mean for the ordering of human societies. Surrounded by a multiplicity of gods, early apologists asserted God’s monarchy as the basis for opposing the pantheon of deities.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, such visions of monarchy, Moltmann explains, sacrifice diversity for unity, freedom for convenience, and dynamic interaction for hierarchy. What is needed is not less God, but a view of the divine that frames all of life within the eternal freedom of Triune love.

The work of these scholars underscores the importance of the divine for social construction. This is especially important in Africa, where God and doxology matter to everyday life, providing essential ingredients by which humans remake the world. In the remainder of this article, I will draw implications for development from various resources found within African Christianity, revealing the strength of doxology in the churches and underscoring its usefulness (while hinting at some dangers) for shaping human societies.

### **African Christianity: From Praise Poetry to Development**

As we turn toward the churches, we find bountiful resources for social construction through doxological flows generated by parishioners. Worship provides people a means by which to re-imagine their world. The nature of God lifts them from their daily struggles. Singing provides people an opportunity to praise, confess, and imagine new realities, while dance

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<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1993), p. 191.

<sup>20</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 192.

<sup>21</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 192.

<sup>22</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, pp. 194-5.

deepens these practices, allowing bodies to reinforce what singing imagines. The nature of God makes this all possible.

Stepping back for a moment, some could argue that if Africa boasts such abundant resources, why all the economic hardships? How can a continent of almost 500 million believers experience such agonizing despair, from dire poverty to political oppression to ethnic conflict?<sup>23</sup> The answer to this question remains complex with some scholars arguing that it relates to a neo-patrimonial legacy infiltrating the churches,<sup>24</sup> while others contend that the colonial era imparted a despotic imagination into the minds of the people, with lingering effects to the present.<sup>25</sup> Without denying the importance of these two factors, I would like to suggest another possibility. Some of the problem has to do with how people envision God, offering both critique and hope for the churches.

To enter a church in Africa is to experience rich, textured ascription of God's character. Songs, prayers, choir performances, and preaching all saturate the service with a deeply imaginative construal of the divine nature with layer upon layer of doxology until it almost appears as if the building is going to burst. People sing God's nature and pray his attributes. They generate "praise poetry" which builds upon a longstanding heritage within African communities.

Names are important to Africans, identifying a person with father, mother, distant ancestor, or the circumstances in which they were born. Thus, names (or titles) provide rich cultural information. Speaking about the Ila of southwestern Zambia, Karin Barber describes how a person's name represents something both open and protected; a source of identity that is at once, "inhabitable space," while simultaneously deeply personal.<sup>26</sup> In many traditions, people generate "praise poetry" in order to link themselves with the identity behind the name. The Yoruba in Nigeria, for example, use names in order to craft lineage and/or negotiate power within the cosmos. Barber explains,

Chanting a person's oriki is empowering. It opens a channel through which the accumulated attributes of the addressee's forebears are heaped upon him to swell his public presence – the basis of big men's greatness. Chanting a god's oriki may provoke it to activity on the chanter's behalf, and or even to

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<sup>23</sup> Despite the ongoing concerns on the continent, we should not overstate the severity of the problem. Africa has experienced economic growth of 5% in the last few years, with commensurate progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals; see *Africa Development Indicators* (New York: The World Bank, 2011), vii.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and written culture in Africa and beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.120-1.

descend to earth and possess the chanter, enabling her or him to perform feats normally out of reach.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile Dinka “ox songs” function in a similar way, connecting humans with cattle. People generate songs to particular oxen, calling out their names, and associating themselves with the praise of the song. Thus “praise poetry” provides a means for growth for all who participate in the song. By chanting ascriptions, singers come into contact with the object of the praise.

It is upon such a dense and creative backdrop that we must understand doxology in the churches as a form of “praise poetry.” Through songs, prayers, and testimonials, people lavish God with ascriptions. Barber explains how praise poetry “involves the vigorous, intense heaping of fragments of reputations, narratives, names, deeds, upon the ‘head’ of the addressee in a sustained effort of instauration.”<sup>28</sup> African Christianity builds upon these cultural traditions to employ hymns, choruses, and prayers for the purposes of participating in God’s attributes. God does not just exist far off, but through doxology, he is brought near.

The names of the divine thus hold vital socio-political significance. Lamin Sanneh explains how Christianity expanded most vigorously where the indigenous name for God was maintained.<sup>29</sup> The name of God in Africa forms the central locus of society, around which agriculture, festivals, and other rites or ceremonies take place. Sanneh remarks, “It is therefore hard to think of viable social systems without the name of God, but easy to envision societies that have become vulnerable because they lost the name or sense of the transcendent.”<sup>30</sup> Hence, God’s names cannot be restricted to some “spiritual” category, distinct from life; but rather people draw upon God’s attributes to see themselves as social actors.<sup>31</sup>

Before getting into specific examples of “praise poetry” in African congregations, I should first establish a few related points. Initially, African cosmology boasts fluid movement between divine and human realms, with many different “crossing points” between the domains.<sup>32</sup> Hence prayer, songs, and other ecclesiastical outputs allow Africans access to divine resources. Furthermore, worship draws upon the metaphorical nature of the body to act

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<sup>27</sup> Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, p. 133.

<sup>29</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Sanneh also says, “the name of God contained ideas of personhood, economic life, and social/cultural identity; the name of God represented the indigenous theological advantage vis-à-vis missionary initiative.” Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-First Century,” *Transformation* 19(4): 2002: pp. 217-228; p. 224.

out, perform, and ritualize embodied beliefs. Parishioners use their bodies to imagine eschatological realities, or dramatize spiritual conflict. Dance becomes a vehicle for telling a story. Through corporate worship, parishioners link together into a larger “social body” for the purposes of dramatizing and ritualizing belief.<sup>33</sup>

### **Doxology and the Names of God:**

As has been shown, African Christianity builds upon a longstanding heritage of doxology to flood supplications with divine ascription. While all prayers in the churches begin with reference to God, most continue to interweave a generous assortment of names throughout, with titles that include: “Father, in the mighty Name of Jesus;” “Jehovah: (or Jehovah God);” “Lord of lords;” “King of kings;” “God of gods;” “Master of masters;” “Priests of Priest;” “Jehovah Jireh;” “God who is all-powerful;” “Mighty God;” “Christ Lord;” “Father and our God who is all-powerful;” “King of Glory;” “God of Truth;” “God of Wonders;” “God who sits on a high throne;” “Everlasting God;” “Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob;” and “Alpha and Omega.”

Based upon this modest list, the names of God most frequently heard in the churches often relate to divine supremacy (Lord of lords, King of kings, King of Glory),<sup>34</sup> power (mighty Name of Jesus, Mighty God, all-powerful), or with reference to patriarchs from the past (Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Meanwhile, Hebrew or Greek names often draw upon insider knowledge of God, whereby parishioners cry out, “Jehovah God,” “Jehovah Jireh,” or “Abba Father” to show intimacy. Other ascriptions carry allusions to God’s eternity (like “Alpha and Omega” or “Everlasting God”) and thus offer continuity with traditional titles such as “Aged One” or “Ancient” to move backward in time for the purpose of moving forward.<sup>35</sup> Below I list one example from a historic church in Kenya. The supplicant cries out,

Father, we exalt your name, a name above all other names, redeemer we lift you, we cleanse you, we come in your presence to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, see us through, really, God, in the name of Jesus we exalt you, cleanse our hands in [the] name of Jesus, we love you, we need you, my Father, my God, we uplift you high, thank you for your coming in your splendor, we glorify you, we honor you, glorify yourself, you never share your glory with anyone. Lift us to your glory; we appreciate you, no one is like you, you enabled us to see another day, meet our needs, you know them, you know us well, you know our thoughts, we worship you. We pray all this in Jesus’ name.

<sup>33</sup> See the work of Gregory F. Barz, *Performing Religion: Negotiating Past and Present in Kwaya Music of Tanzania* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> The repetition of a name heightens its strength or significance; thus, people frequently say “Lord of Lords,” or “King of Kings,” “Master of Masters,” or “Priest of Priest.”

<sup>35</sup> John Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976).

In this prayer, the supplicant moves in and out of divine attributes, referring to God as father, redeemer, my God, and Jesus, and then applies these titles to human needs. Parishioners come to God (“we come in your presence”) so that God would carry them to his presence (“Lift us to your glory”). By exalting his attributes (“We want to acknowledge your power and majesty”) or appealing to his universality (“Mighty Father, Jesus who is, was, and will be”), people expect to see change in their everyday existence (“meet our needs, you know them well, you know us well”).

Songs and choir performances continue many of these themes, lavishing God with praise for the purpose of interacting with the object of praise. People sing: “How excellent is your Name, O Lord;” “Lord, you reign;” *Wacheni Mungu aitwe Mungu* (Let God be known as God); or, *Hakuna mungu kama wewe ... nimetumbea kotekote, numetafuta kotekote, nimezunguka kotekote, hakuna na hatakuwepo* (There is no God like Him. I have walked or travelled in places searching and have gone around, but have never seen one like you). These lyrics (and the corresponding motions) elevate God for the purposes of making Him more accessible to human needs. By “lifting up” the divine, they position God as relevant to the circumstances of everyday life.

Finally, many of the songs focus upon God’s power, singing: “The Lion of Judah has given us power, has given us power, hallelujah day by day;” *Anaweza, anaweza Bwana* (He is able, The Lord is able); *Yesu ni Ivia Ilumu* (Jesus is the strong stone) (Kikamba); or, *Mungu, unaweza, mkono wako ni mkuu sana* (God you are able, your arm is very great). In prayers, parishioners shout ascriptions to the divine’s “powerful,” “mighty,” or monarchial nature, referring to Him as “King of kings,” “Lord of lords,” and “Almighty God.” All of this underscores the importance of power within African cosmology. Since God is the source of all power, humans tap His power in order to grow. Allan Anderson comments, “To Africans, our life, or very existence is inextricably tied up with our power. To live is to have power; to be sick or to die is to have less of it.”<sup>36</sup> Hence, while congregants feast upon an assortment of divine titles, the most conspicuous relate to articulations of power, by which parishioners sing, pray, or dance in order to participate with God’s nature.

### **From “Praise Poetry” to Development:**

We must now pause to reflect upon the viability of “praise poetry” for development matters. Do the names of God or “praise poetry” direct people to the streets, *shambas* (agricultural land), and other public spaces? Certainly, the material above suggests that African Christianity boasts abundant resources to traverse with God’s attributes into socio-economic, or socio-political domains. The question is, does doxology make any difference beyond

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<sup>36</sup> Allan Anderson, “Pentecostal Pneumatology and African Power Concepts: Continuity or Change?” *Missionalia* 19 (1): 1990: 65-74; pp. 68-9.

the walls of the church? The ubiquity of “development committees” in churches throughout the continent suggests that they take such things seriously. Most congregations have ministries to orphans, widows, and other marginalized members of their communities, moving from worship into public realities. Meanwhile, their implicit theology proceeds from spiritual matters to material affairs with ample imaginative energies, while ritualized in embodied practices such as dance. Yet very few congregations delve into politics, despite rampant corruption in the regions. Paul Gifford contends that African Christianity has become co-opted by the neo-patrimonial system of governance by which rulers and the elite strive to keep the people subservient through a wide range of bribes, threats, and other coercive means.<sup>37</sup> Yet Gifford never unpacks the theology of the churches, other than to say that it lacks a prophetic nature and has become co-opted by the neo-patrimonial state.

Perhaps one concern lies with how churches envision God. Hierarchical conceptions within African cosmology suggest that elders or different authorities have more power by virtue of being closer to the source of power.<sup>38</sup> Nearness to the divine (whether spirits, ancestors, or God) aligns the rulers with the sacred, thus making it nearly impossible for anyone to argue against them.<sup>39</sup> The second concern relates with how parishioners view God’s power. We may question whether congregants’ focus on God as “King,” along with His “powerful” and “mighty” nature may also contribute to the problem. Might kingship establish (and sanction) a standard by which political authorities share a similar status to God, similar to the argument expressed earlier by Moltmann?

Much has to do with a moral ontology of power. Is power a good, creational thing emanating from God’s nature that all people share? Or does power become localized in specific humans with a tendency to prioritize their self-interests over others? For African Christianity to better tap these resources, human power needs to be based upon the self-giving love of the Triune God and the sacrificial *kenosis* of Jesus Christ. Likewise, more energy needs to be given to nurturing stronger connections between God’s power and world construction. The heritage of Western missions left an ambiguous

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<sup>37</sup> See Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); or *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya* (2009); See also Gregg Okesson, “‘Drinking Chai with a Sociologist’: Review Article for *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya*, by Paul Gifford,” *Transformation*, 29:1 (Jan 2012), pp. 15-29.

<sup>38</sup> See Ruth Lucier, “Dynamics of Hierarchy in African Thought,” *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 24:1 (1989): pp. 29-40.

<sup>39</sup> I argue elsewhere that such a “sacralized” status also affects their humanity, making it hard for clergy to work for the humanization of their communities; see G. Okesson, “Are Pastors Human? Sociological and Theological Implications for Ministerial Identity in Africa,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 25:2 (2008): pp. 19-39.

legacy of emphasizing both spirituality and materiality, but often without the resources to move nimbly between the two. Emmanuel Katongole bemoans how “spiritual” in Africa often takes the form of something like a time capsule, with “the latent capacity of cultural changes held in religious storage to emerge over time when circumstances are propitious.”<sup>40</sup> However, this article has suggested that African Christianity has all the resources within its doxology to overcome these divides. Development activity needs to build upon the kind of imaginative “praise poetry” taking place in the churches for engaging the world.

### Conclusion

There can be no question that doxology in the churches feasts upon a rich assortment of power and kingship images. The task for the churches is to convert “praise poetry” into stories, narratives, and underlying social imaginaries that underwrite social, economic, and political structures on the continent, making it a performed text. The one thing the continent has in rich abundance is praise, built upon dynamic, multifaceted views of God’s nature, and ritualized through embodied practices such as dance. The churches need to tap their robust conceptions of God, moving with doxology out into the streets, where development work takes place.

In a similar way to how Yahweh calls Israel into existence, God’s character continues to serve as the primary resource for social construction. Within a world where the religious domain has been carefully partitioned from ostensibly “secular” affairs of life, or where development scholars hesitate to move into theological categories, African Christianity offers hope. Within the churches, the names of God directly pertain to human affairs. Parishioners construct “praise poetry” for navigating through the travails of life. As God is “lifted up” He becomes more accessible to human need. Admittedly, many of these forms remain undeveloped. But African Christianity has the opportunity to underscore the importance of “God” for the world. In the churches, we find a compelling case study for exploring important linkages between doxology and development.

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<sup>40</sup> Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, p. 35.

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