

## Reading John Calvin in the African context: any relevance for the social reconstruction of Africa?

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### Abstract

The article sets out to demonstrate that even though John Calvin, the great reformer of the 16th century CE, was grossly misinterpreted by neo-Calvinists, especially with regard to the African context, he nevertheless deserves our attention as we mark 500 years since his birth (1509–2009). In other words, postcolonial Africa has to learn from his reforms in the socio-religious and educational sectors, among others. In the era of reconstruction, can his reforms be seen as reconstructive? Were the proponents and pioneers of an African renaissance like Marcus Garvey and WEB Dubois driven by Calvinism when they advocated “Africa for the Africans”? Was Calvinism misinterpreted in the Afrikaners’ sense of divine destiny in apartheid South Africa? To this end, the article will build on the hypothesis that our quest for an authentic and holistic liberation and reconstruction of postcolonial Africa will require us to revisit the gallant efforts of John Calvin’s reforms, as his was an applied and pragmatic theology that is relevant in our African context today. Reading John Calvin in the African context thus calls us to re-examine society in general and address areas that beg for reforms. In turn, this will invite us to act with decorum and with a sense of urgency.

### Introduction

John Calvin (1509-1564), Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531) are the three greatest reformers of the 16th century who ushered in the era of Reformation. It is critical to appreciate that these Protestant reformers gallantly sought to reconstruct the (catholic) church from within albeit with considerable challenges. In particular, they differed sharply with the claim: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, (outside the Church there is no salvation). Rather, they propounded their Protestant Reformation thesis of *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone) and *sola gratia* (salvation is by grace alone) or *sola fide* (salvation is by faith alone) (see Gathogo 2006:420).

In a nutshell, it is imperative to appreciate that Reformation is the name given to a series of reforms and reorganisations of the Western church at the local, regional and national levels in the 16th century. From a wider perspective, it can also refer to the period from the beginning of the 15th to the close of the 17th century CE. It was caused by a variety of factors. These influencing factors were religious, theological, cultural, social and economic. In particular, political developments in the late medieval and in the early modern periods were a critical cause (Sifuna & Otiende 2006:97-146). In turn, the Reformation had profound effects on the future politics and the religious life of Western Europe, and the world at large, as evidenced by the fact that it has been subjected to varieties of interpretations by historians. For instance, in the 19th century CE, it was regarded as the religious wing of the Renaissance. Some historians feel that it, together with the Renaissance, made the critical break with the Middle Ages and marshalled in the so-called modernity (Sifuna & Otiende 2006:81-5). Accordingly, it did so by contributing to the decline of the supremacy of the papal power, which was at its zenith from 1054 to 1305 CE, and saw the emergence of sovereign nation states. It also made a decisive break with the Middle Ages by removing economics from the realm of canon law. In turn, this permitted the rise of capitalism and the urban middle class. In particular the inheritance of the Reformation, in Britain, helped to provide a national identity; and this was largely due to the widespread popularity of John Foxe’s *Book of martyrs* in England (Sifuna & Otiende 2006:110). This contrasted with the United States of America, where the same inheritance was credited with initiating the era of religious tolerance. In turn, it paved the way for the separation of church and state.

Conversely, the 20th century CE, with its two world wars – 1914-18 and 1939-45 – saw a reaction against such progressive, optimistic views of history, as the so-called Age of Enlightenment of

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the 18th Century CE had already set in.<sup>i</sup> In particular, in 1960s Europe, the Reformation was seen as having more in common with the late-medieval traditions from which it emerged than with modernity. As a consequence, its religious discourses were seen as impediments rather than as hastening the emergence of the nation states. This can be seen in the fact that the late development of Germany as a unified nation was, for instance, attributed to Luther's own preference for regional monarchies (see for instance, Sifuna & Otiende 2006:97-146). Marxists saw the possibilities for genuine social change (Sifuna & Otiende: 2006:97-146).

On the other hand, the rights of women and minorities had to await the Enlightenment and after. As in the case of postcolonial African theologies of reconstruction, the significance of the Reformation as a theological event was not primarily concerned with the fundamental Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Christology, as the Patristic period had been, except by some rationalists. Rather, the concern is applied theology in the broadest sense. Jesse Mugambi, one of the chief proponents, explains that an African theology of reconstruction should be "inclusive rather than exclusive ... complementary rather than competitive; integrative rather than disintegrative ... participatory rather than autocratic ... co-operative rather than confrontational; consultative rather than impositional" (Mugambi 1995:xv). He goes on to show its reconstructive task in the Africa of the 21st century as that which demands the practitioners of Christian theology to apply their ethics in addressing the challenges facing tropical Africa (Mugambi 2003). This helps out in setting the hypothesis of this article that though they did not proclaim it, the reformers motif was reconstructive – as they sought to reconstruct for the betterment of the society at large. As in the case of the post-exilic people of Judah, they sought to rebuild the "broken walls" of their time; hence their clarion call of reform was basically meant to invite the people to the all-important task of reforming the church and society. This compares well with Nehemiah's appeal: "Let's start rebuilding!" (Nehemiah 2:18).

### **Predestination and racism in Africa**

One of the most controversial teachings in John Calvin's works is on the doctrine of predestination. On the one hand, it was misinterpreted in the era of apartheid South Africa to argue the case of preservation of certain "predestined" and privileged races; while on the other hand, some pan-Africanists, in the first half of the 20th century CE, seem to have built on it in their quest for an African Renaissance movement. In South Africa, the "Calvinist Boers" saw Africans as a "cursed race" (Baur 1994:191). As a consequence, they could not understand why Dr. John Philip, the London Missionary Society (LMS) superintendent of the 19th Century CE, was 'wasting' time fighting for the welfare of the blacks. For with the growing demand for cheap labour and fresh land, a situation which was aggravated by the suppression of the slave trade in 1807, there was need to look for alternative ways. In view of this, the 30 years of British take-over (1805-36) saw the Cape Colony develop greatly; the Boers were joined by some five thousand English settlers. This ultimately led to massive taking over of African land and even introducing new policies such as compulsory service (Baur 1994:190). After protests from both the locals and some LMS missionaries, some civil rights were granted to the Hottentots, including the right of appeal to court and freedom of work. In 1835, the slaves were to be liberated and were now to enjoy equal rights (Bauer 1994:191). This angered the "Calvinistic" Boer settlers who reacted through the infamous Great Trek (1836-1840), where they trekked from the Cape Colony to the interior of the present day Republic of South Africa. As a result the trek saw the migration of some 6 000 Boers with their servants beyond the Orange and Vaal rivers, in order to find a new home, where the Anglicizing British administrators and the LMS "teachers of human liberties" would not 'molest' them any more (Bauer 1994:191).

Anne Steenkamp, a leading Boer lady, noted that the main reason for the Great Trek was not so much the freedom given to the blacks, who were in reality slaves, but "their being placed on an equal footing with Christians [referring to LMS], contrary to the laws of God and the natural distinction of race and colour, so that it was intolerable for any decent Christian" (Steenkamp quoted in Baur 1994:191). Additionally, the "Calvinistic" Boers opposed the preaching of LMS missionaries because they did not teach that whites were a superior race. As John Baur (1994:191) notes, there had been a lack of white labour, from the very beginning, as manual work was done by coloured people, significantly called "Kaffir work". This implies that whites were masters while blacks were servants. Thus, just as Indians found the sanction of castes in Hinduism, the Boers found it in the Bible, where they propounded on the Calvinist doctrine of predestination.<sup>ii</sup> In their endeavours to justify their theological position, the Boers found solace in the famous catalogue of nations in Genesis 9, where the Cushites (Nubians) are placed together with Egyptians and Canaanites under the descendants of Ham, hence the Hamites. Even though the biblical classification only wanted to show the traditional enemies

of Israel, the Calvinist Boers just classed blacks and their polygamous lives as the cursed people implied in the biblical text (Baur 1994:191). In contrast, they saw themselves as the elect.

Historically, the origins of Afrikaners' sense of divine destiny are bound up with first arrival of the Dutch at the Cape of Good Hope (1652). They saw themselves as "the heirs and bearers of European [Calvinistic] Christian civilization" (Stott 1982:213). As they travelled in ox wagons to the North and East so as to escape from the British rule, their conviction of a special destiny increased. They saw the trek as the new exodus, a divine deliverance from alien oppression, and they felt tested like the Israel in the wilderness. They saw the hostile black nations whom they had to overcome during the trek as the Amalekites and the Philistines. With such great faith and conviction, they were able to defeat the fierce Zulu nation during the Battle of Blood River, after which "they entered into a solemn covenant with God", and henceforth declared Transvaal and the Orange Free State as the Promised Land "to which God had brought them" (Stott 1982:213). This sacralisation imprinted their Afrikaner consciousness, as they now saw themselves as the true nation of God, the chosen race.

As John Baur (1994:191) notes, the Boers' feeling of superiority was a clear proof of the "indubitable certainty of grace" in which all heirs of Calvin believed very strongly, perhaps more than he himself did. Clearly, Calvin's view of the community of the elect is that it is they who formed the invisible church. Unfortunately, the Boers identified the invisible church with their racial community sojourning in a heathen land (Bauer 1994:192). Interestingly, their position was strengthened by the Great Trek, as they equated it with the exodus story. To them thus, the British oppression was comparable to the Pharaoh's oppression in Egypt (Cape Colony). Their trek to the interior was seen as the journey to the Promised Land of milk, honey, freedom and prosperity (Stott 1982:13). As "God's chosen people" entitled to take possession of the land into which they were led in their Covenant of the Trek, they promised not to attack, but only defend themselves. In practice however, and as shown above, they had to subdue all the neighbouring Africans who regarded them as aggressors. And to subdue them meant to make them their servants – hewers of wood and drawers of water. As racism developed full blown symptoms, the Dutch Reformed Church, the Boer mother Church, in 1857 introduced the law demanding that whites sit apart from coloured people during services. They also advocated for the building of special churches for the Hottentots (read Africans). The latter proposal was realised in 1859 when an exclusively Bantu Church was founded (Bauer 1994:192). On the other hand, the LMS missionaries opted for inclusivity as opposed to exclusivity. In particular, their leading pastors such as Van der Kemp and Schmelen demonstrated their belief in the equality for all when they married African women, even though intermarriage with "slave women" had been prohibited in as early as 1685.

Another extreme version of misinterpretation of Calvinism can be seen in the earlier version of the African Renaissance movement. Even though the leading figures such as Sylvester Williams, Marcus Garvey, William EB Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta,<sup>iii</sup> Nnadi Azikiwe and George Padmore among others did not claim to be Calvinistic, they brought the view of Africa being predestined for black Africans. In particular, Marcus Mozhiah Garvey (1887-1940), the guru of the movement, made it clear when he said: "If Europe is for Europeans, Asia for Asiatics, then WHY IS AFRICA NOT FOR AFRICANS?" (Garvey quoted in Gathogo 2001:121). Even though this slogan of "*AFRICA FOR AFRICANS*" was seen to smack of racism, it became the clarion call for African nationalists as they wrested freedom from the colonising powers. In practical terms, the statement positively inspired the African nationalist movements which emerged after the Second World War (1939-1945). It however appears like an ideology that was set out to balkanise the world into a blacks only zone versus an Asiatics only zone and/or even a Europeans only zone, among others. While the call may have some substance, it failed to take into account that there are blacks in West Indies, the Americas and even in other parts of the world whose expulsion would create a serious crisis to the world and Africa in particular. Thus, while colonialism was bad, and needed urgent dismantling, a call for people to relocate to their ancestral areas of origin, on account of race, may prove a tricky one in the Africa of the 21st century and the world at large.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica (West Indies) in 1887 as the eleventh child of Marcus and Sarah Garvey, Marcus Mozhiah desperately wanted to see African men and women no longer treated as serfs, dogs and slaves, but as men and women of affairs making an impression upon civilisation and causing a new light to dawn upon the human race. As he moved around black dominated areas in the Americas and the West Indies he said: "No longer must our race look to whites for guidance and leadership; who best can interpret the anguish and the needs of our people but an African?" In direct challenge to African-American men, he said:

Take down the pictures of white women from your walls. Elevate your own women to the place of honour. They are for the most part the burden-bearers of the race. Mothers!

Give your children dolls that look like them to play with and cuddle. They will learn as they grow older to love and care for their own children and not neglect them. Men and women, God made us as his perfect creation. He made no mistake when he made us African with kinky hair. It was a divine purpose for us to live in our natural habitat – the tropical zones of the earth. Forget the whiteman’s banter that He made us in the night and forgot to paint us white. That we were brought here against our will [as slaves] is just a natural process of the strong enslaving the weak ... You are capable of all that is common to men (sic) of other races. So let us start now to build big business, commerce, industry and eventually a nation of our own to protect us wherever we choose to live (Garvey quoted in Gathogo 2001:121).

He concluded:

... I know no national boundary where the African is concerned. The whole world is my province until AFRICA IS FREE ... A beggar-race can never be respected. Stop begging for jobs and create your own! Look around you and wherever you see the need for factories and business, supply it. Stop begging for a chance, make it yourself. Remember, God helps those who help themselves (Garvey quoted in Gathogo 2001:121).

Another person who strongly championed his course through appealing to the race factor and believed in Africa being predestined for blacks is William EB Du Bois. He was the convener of the First Pan-African Conference in Paris in 1919 and the succeeding Pan-African Conferences including the Fifth Manchester Pan-African Conference of 1945. And in this climactic conference of 1945, the idea of the struggle for African independence was born. In turn, it transformed itself to a major struggle for freedom and dignity throughout the massive continent of Africa (Nasibi 2009:6). As an African American freedom fighter who championed the course of African independence and Pan African movement, Du Bois went beyond Garvey by renouncing his American citizenship and returned to Africa after Ghana gained constitutional independence from Britain in 1957. He died a Ghanaian citizen (Nasibi 2009:6). It is interesting that when the first black president of the United States of America, Barack Obama, visited Ghana in July 2009, he visited not only the grave of Kwame Nkrumah, the founding president; but also the grave of Dr. Du Bois (Nasibi 2009:6). Again, by choosing to return, live, die and even be buried in Africa, Du Bois’s case poses the danger of implying that Africans are predestined to be born, live and die in Africa, and probably not anywhere else. While this could be true, it is critical to appreciate that human nature is prone to curiosity – a phenomenon that calls us to sail across the deep and explore the new worlds, always venturing into the unknown as a hallmark of human progress. Hence the difficulty in confining Africans into Africa or any group of people into a specific geographical area. In light of the misunderstood doctrine of predestination, it is worthwhile to revise it with the intent to reconstruct our diverse interpretations of it.

### **John Calvin as a reconstructionist?**

As a pioneer reconstructionist, John Calvin’s major contribution is seen in his *Institutes*, which has been accepted as the authoritative expression of the Reformed theology. In this work, he laid the foundation for the Reformed emphasis on the importance of doctrine and the centrality of God in Christian theology. He also wrote commentaries on all the books of the Bible except 2 and 3 John and Revelation, which he honestly admitted that he did not understand.

In taking his hymnology from the Psalms to set out the importance of music, Calvin’s methodology in religious discourse easily agrees with that of reconstructionist theologians in postcolonial Africa. In particular, his approach appears to be in working agreement with Bolaji Idowu (1973:84); though he wrote in the 1970s before the whole of concept reconstructive motif came into the scene of African church history in the 1990s, he notes that

[s]ongs constitute a rich heritage for the whole of Africa. For Africans are always singing and in their singing and poetry, they express themselves ... Singing is always a vehicle conveying certain sentiments or truths. When songs are connected with rituals they convey the faith of worshippers from the heart-faith in the Deity, belief in and about divinities, assurance and hopes about the present and with regard to the hereafter.

In building the case for the importance of songs, Thorpe (1991:116) introduces an element of singing in Africa where drama and dance accompany the art of music. Thorpe further says that Africans dance to celebrate every “[i]maginable situation – joy, grief, love, hate, to bring prosperity, to avert calamity. In

addition, singing and joyful conversation enable African people to minimise tensions within an enclosed community” (Thorpe 1991:116).

In propounding his African theology of reconstruction, Jesse Mugambi cites four cases of “revival” songs that point to the shape of his proposal for what he calls the “individual reconstruction”. They include, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me,” “Teach me thy way o Lord,” “Take my life and let it be consecrated to thee,” and “Just I am without one plea” (Mugambi 1995:15f). And in assessing the above songs, one realises that it is the individual who is pleading to God (as in Psalms 138, 139, 140, 141-143) or praising God (as in Psalms 145-150) at a personal level, as opposed to communal praise and worship for God. In other words, it is both a prayer and a thanksgiving to God that directly affects the individual who wants fellowship with his or her maker. For example, in “Amazing Grace”, the speaker describes himself or herself as a former wretch; one who was previously lost, a blind person who could not see. He/she had no vision and no hope. But after God’s “amazing grace” whose sound was sweet, he/she encountered peace in God who reconstructed his or her life. It is from there that the individual would now move out to reconstruct the rest of the society when the plank in his or her eyes was already removed.

Another major contribution in John Calvin’s works that sets him in dialogue with African theologies of the 21st century is the concern for education.<sup>iv</sup> In particular, the education of a girl child is a major concern. For among some pastoralist communities of Kenya, especially the Marakwets of Northern Kenya, young girls are married off earlier in their teenage years after forced circumcision, where they are “prepared” for “adult life.” Rather than educating them, adults tell them that the exercise of genital mutilation now prepares them for familyhood. In demonstrating his concern for education, Calvin set up in Geneva a three-level system of education at the top of which was the Academy, now known as the University of Geneva, in 1559. Later, Calvinists created colleges in the Americas (Cairns 1996:305).

In this 16th Century Reformation, where John Calvin was one of the principal players, European educational institutions, which had already been influenced by Renaissance humanism of the 15th century CE, were profoundly affected. To this end, the various denominations developed their own theologies of education, established their own schools and sought to commit the young members of the Church to defend the ‘faith’ against rival creeds. As a consequence, the general Protestant emphasis on individual biblical reading and interpretation fostered a demand for universal literacy (Sifuna & Otiende 2006:105).

In seeking to reform the education system of the French-speaking Swiss city of Geneva, John Calvin, the exiled French lawyer (1509-1564), ultimately reconstructed the society. In turn, Calvinism, which emerged after his death, rejected the medieval Catholic hierarchical traditions and the sacramental system. It went on to assert that the Bible is a self-sufficient authority; and that both the New and Old Testaments had revealed all that could be known about God and the place of humanity in God’s schema of creation (Sifuna & Otiende 2006:108).

Concerning liturgical reform, John Calvin’s liturgy consisted primarily of scriptural reading (*sola scriptura*), preaching of the word (*sola fide*), and the recitation of congregational prayers and psalms. Additionally, rather than wait for priests, Calvinists, regardless of religious status, were expected to read their Bibles. Church ministers were expected to provide a highly intellectual theology to the masses, and for this, they were required to be reasonably literate. Educated laity was also encouraged (see Cairns 1996). This emphasis on the training and re-training of clergy, so as to make them at par with their counterparts in other disciplines, is also given much emphasis in African theologies of reconstruction. To this end, Jesse Mugambi (1995:26) attempts to offer a justification for proper training and retraining of personnel in the church and other institutions of our society. He explains that the contemporary Africa is undergoing rapid social transition, with new beliefs, norms and values introduced from outside, while old traditions have to be modified to suit changing circumstances (Mugambi 1995:26). He wonders: “Is teacher training and theological education adequately adjusted for the purpose of full socialization of the youth?” He (Mugambi 1995:26) says:

Christian theological education refers to the process of training personnel for specialised service within the various departments of an ecclesiastical institution. A church worker who is adequately trained should thoroughly understand the theological and historical foundations of his denomination. In addition, he or she should be equipped with skills for the effective management of a particular aspect of ministry, such as nursing, teaching, agriculture, engineering and so on.

While propounding the view that ecclesial reconstruction will require the church to raise the skills level of its workers and especially its clergy; Mugambi (1995:150) cautions about the danger of acquiring

education abroad, which is not relevant to the needs at home. He does not rule out however the thought of giving opportunities to those who are already trained in Africa to travel abroad for the purpose of international exposure. Clearly, as Mugambi has stated, if church leaders and churches are not “exemplary social institutions, they lose the moral power to guide others” (Mugambi 1995:180). Thus he sees ecclesial reconstruction as that which requires that serving Church personnel be retrained, and the training of new personnel be reviewed afresh (Mugambi 1995:179). In particular, he contends that African churches ought to ensure that their lay and ordained workers are at least as well trained as their counterparts in the public and private sectors. To ensure this, he avers, minimum standards with regard to “recruitment and training requirements will need to be brought to parity with those of the public and private sectors” in each country. He concludes that this will be “an important step towards the restoration of declining confidence in church leadership” (Mugambi 1995:179).

Concerning economic reconstruction, proponents of an African theology of reconstruction see the secret behind it as lying with a well-disciplined and well-qualified labour force (cf. Mugambi 1995:179). This resonates well with the Calvinists. In his research, Max Weber (1864-1920), a sociologist, examined the connection between religious allegiance and capitalist development. He noted that in European nation states with Protestant and Catholic citizens, an overwhelming number of business leaders, owners of capital and skilled workers were Protestant. In his view, this was no mere coincidence. To this end, he observed that the followers of John Calvin (1509-1564) emphasised a disciplined work ethic. This phenomenon has become known as the Protestant work ethic. In brief, Calvinists emphasised:

- Every one was called by God to their particular way of life. Any career therefore became a religious vocation.
- Life is a pilgrimage. This approach to life made them reject alcohol and extravagant feasts.
- God’s blessings in life were taken as a sign that a person was saved and God was happy with him or her.
- Favour with God could neither be gained by the right performance of sacramental rituals nor by the performance of certain prescribed pious acts.
- Individuals did not need intermediaries with God in the form of a Church hierarchy. They were encouraged to think and judge for themselves as God inspired them (see Weber 1963).

In building on the Protestant work ethic and the need for African-Americans to be proud of themselves, Martin Luther King Junior (1929-68), the Baptist pastor and the American Civil Rights leader, seemingly stressed this Calvinistic theme of handwork, and the need to reconstruct ourselves economically, when he said:

After accepting ourselves and our tools, we must discover what we are called to do. And once we discover it we should set out to do it with all of the strength and all of the power that we have in our systems. And after we’ve discovered what God called us to do, after we’ve discovered our life’s work, we should set out to do that work so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn couldn’t do it any better.

He goes on to say,

Now, this does not mean that everybody will do the so-called big, recognized things of life. Very few people will rise to the heights of genius in the arts and the sciences; very few collectively will rise to certain professions. Most of us will have to be content to work in the fields and in the factories and on the streets. But we must see the dignity of all labour (Carson & Holloran 2008:125).

One consequence of the Protestant work ethic was the drive to accumulate savings that could be invested for future use and for the individual and social reconstruction of the society. Interestingly, this spirit of capitalism contrasted with the moderate work hours, leisurely work habit and lack of ambition that Max Weber discovered was typical of the times (see Weber 1963).<sup>v</sup> It is from this observation that Weber concluded that Calvinism initiated social transformation that was critical in the economic reconstruction of the respective peoples. Thus, unlike Karl Marx (1818-1883), before him, who saw religion as an impediment to the rebuilding of the society, Weber’s research displayed the critical role of religion in positive transformation of a society.

Another area in which Calvinism compares well with the post-exilic theologies in Africa is the emphasis on context (see methodology in doing theology of reconstruction in Gathogo 2008b:23-62; Mugambi 1995:150; Dedji 2003). For like Lutherans, Calvinists favoured a dual track system of schools. This was principally meant to emphasise context, as common people attended vernacular schools whose curriculum consisted of the catechism, psalms, religious materials, reading, writing, arithmetic and history. In turn, the upper class children who were going on to higher studies were taught classical Latin grammar, which was a bit advanced when compared to the former. The school was meant to prepare future ministers, lawyers and leaders of higher education by emphasising Latin, Greek and Hebrew (Sifuna & Otiende 2006:109).

John Calvin also influenced the growth of democracy “because he accepted the representative principle in government of the church and the state” (Cairns 1996:305). He held that both the church and the state were God’s creations – meant to serve the people and that they should work together amicably in the furthering of Christianity. This concern for democracy and the emphasis on inclusivity, especially with regard to the issue of juxtaposition between church and state resonates well with African theology of reconstruction which urges for inclusivity as opposed to exclusivity (Villa-Vicencio 1992:1-7; Gathogo 2008b:31-33; Dedji 2003). Unfortunately, Calvin’s emphasis on the union of church and state failed to yield fruit among the evangelical British Protestant missionaries to East Africa in the 18th and the 19th century CE. Upon their arrival, they collaborated with the Protectorate (later colonial) government, especially in the Kikuyu nation of Kenya, since its establishment in 1895. Certainly, in their attempt to ensure the smooth running of their mission stations, the missionaries worked hand-in-hand with the colonising powers even in matters to do with recommending those “loyal” and “good” Africans who could serve the local government better. For instance, at the Church Missionary Society’s Mutira Mission, in the present day Kirinyaga Central District of Central Kenya, the Assistant Chief, Ndegwa wa Kimere, supported the missionary work in order to retain and secure his precarious job. He had seen how his immediate predecessor, Munge wa Ndaruru, had been unceremoniously bundled out of his post after falling out with the pioneer missionary in the locality, Brandon Laight. Reportedly, the then Assistant Chief Ndaruru had simply denied a passageway for the missionary’s bicycle (Karanja 1999:52ff; see also Gathogo 2008a:73). Clearly, it was Laight who was advising the local District Commissioner on whom to hire, promote or even dismiss.

By the time Kenya was confirmed as a British colony in 1920, the Kikuyu had already become suspicious of whatever role they were playing, however good it was. Certainly, there were remarkable achievements such as the establishment of schools, hospitals or even churches. Of great importance is the fact that the missionaries worked hand-in-hand with the Protectorate government in 1899-1900 to contain the smallpox and other natural disasters which were threatening to eliminate the Kikuyu nation. In particular, smallpox is estimated to have been threatening to wipe out over 50% of the population (Karanja 1999: 50). As a result of this suspicion, the ordinary people could be heard saying, *Gutiri muthungu na mubia*. That is, there is no marked difference in manners, intentions, parentage, creed and background between the white missionary and the white settler/colonial administrator (Nthamburi 1995:39).

Undoubtedly, in collaborating with the colonial authorities, the Protestant missionaries, noted above, were influenced by Reformation theology, as propounded by Luther, Zwingli and Calvin among others. In particular, Martin Luther and John Calvin preached the doctrine of loyalty and submission to civil authority. Such submission, argued Calvin, “is equally as necessary to humanity as bread and water and light and air and far more excellent” (Baron 1947:122). He stressed that obedience to the State should be grounded not only on the fear of civil punishment but also on the fear of the Lord. As for the secular princes and leaders, he regarded them as “vicars and lieutenants of God whom one cannot resist without resisting God himself” (Baron 1947:123). This compares with Martin Luther’s view that “secular empire cannot exist without inequality in person, that some be free and some in bondage, some masters and some subjects” (Luther quoted in Gathogo 2008a:86). This conviction led the Protestant missionaries in East Africa to have a biased and unreflective theology that failed to give room to the existing African religious discourses; and consequently dismissed them simply as either vague or nonexistent (see Gathogo 2008a:86). This points to the danger of taking the Reformers’ theology uncritically. Perhaps, in pushing Calvinism too far, some missionaries served as “liaison officers between the colonial Government and the people”, while others became “part-time civil servants” and some even fought in “a war of supremacy between tribes” (Idowu quoted in Baeta 1968:424).

Another case in point is the silence of the church during the Mau Mau rebellion or generally during the struggle for Kenya’s independence (1940s to 1960s). Speaking at an African National Congress (hereafter ANC) Conference, September 21, 1953, Mandela aptly summarises the Kenyan situation at the time:

The massacre of the Kenyan people by Britain has aroused worldwide indignation and protest. Children are being burnt alive; women are raped, tortured, whipped and boiling water poured on their breasts to force confessions from them that Jomo Kenyatta had administered the Mau Mau oath to them. Men are being castrated and shot dead. In the Kikuyu country there are some villages in which the population has been completely wiped out.

Mandela (1994:42) went on to say:

We are prisoners in our own country because we dared to raise our voices against those horrible atrocities and because we expressed our solidarity with the cause of the Kenyan people. You can see that there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountain tops of our desires.

Jesse Mugambi concurs with Mandela when he discloses his bitter experiences during that period. He experienced the missionary enterprise in which suppressions of African culture in the church and the rest of the society were all too common. He observes:

During that period, 1952 until 1962, the missionary agencies fully supported the colonial regime. In school and at the church they (as citizens of the empire) taught us to be docile subjects of Her Majesty the Queen. Yet they expected us to respect them. Rather than winning respect, they instilled fear in us. While accepting the Gospel, we rejected its ideological misappropriation by the missionary establishments. Thus long before I began to study theology I knew and understood the difference between oppression and liberation (Mugambi 2003).

As a consequence, the missionaries were not in a position to play their prophetic roles whenever the situation demanded. Obviously, there are a few exceptions: some missionaries in the second half of the 20th century represented Africans in the Legislative Council and thereby acted as the unofficial opposition party to the colonial government (Githiga 2001:28). Archdeacon Walter Edwin Owen, as an example, earned the derogatory title “Arch-demon” by his white colleagues because he fought for African rights (in Kenya) and was deeply concerned with the welfare of humanity, regardless of race, creed, status or area of origin (Githiga 2001:217). He even formed a political party in 1921 so as to cater for the welfare of the marginalised blacks in the locality, that is, the Young Kavirondo Association (YKA). It was later renamed the Young Kavirondo Welfare Association. Similarly, and as noted earlier, the leader of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Southern Africa, who was also the superintendent from 1819 to 1851, Dr John Philip, advocated strongly for the rights of both Khoekhoe and Xhosa, especially after a large part of their ancestral land was taken during the so-called “British takeover” (1806-36) and even after the Great Trek (1836-40) (Baur 1994:190-191). From this, the practitioners of post-exilic theology in Africa have lessons to learn on the dangers of pushing the whole concept of inclusivity too far in their bid to rebuild Africa. For if inclusivity, on one hand, practically means to kill the prophetic voices of the church in order for the Church and State to be seen to be working in harmony, then it may not work at all times, as the necessary tension between the two will always remain. Certainly, inclusivity is a necessity; but we must be perceptive enough to ask ourselves: whom do we include and whom and when do we exclude in this important task of reconstruction? Obviously, imprudent ‘inclusivity’ may prove tricky for the Africa of the 21st century; the walls and spirits of destruction are still with us, as evidenced by the May 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa and the post December 27, 2007 Kenya, where an election dispute took a violent turn.

## **Conclusion**

The article began by surveying the 16th century CE Reformation that proceeded from the age of the Renaissance, which can be interpreted as a rebirth of classical learning, and where religious aspects took a back seat. And while the Renaissance climaxed in the 15th century, the Reformation came to repair the damage that had been wrought by its overemphasis on humanism. To this end, the emergence of John Calvin who was one of the key thinkers of the time is critical. He led not only in the reformation of socio-religious life but, more importantly, in the education system in particular. This compares well with the reconstruction project in Africa, where the proponents of the theology of reconstruction have treated education as one of their key concerns. Other key concerns include

tribalism and xenophobia, poverty, democracy, human rights, environment, violence, patriarchy and HIV and AIDS. Clearly, Africa has to address these challenges, as she seeks to position herself globally, in view of globalisation. A re-reading of John Calvin's reforms is thus critical, as we seek to reconstruct neo-Calvinistic (mis)interpretations. Only then will Calvinism be relevant to Africa.

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### Endnotes

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- 1 Certainly, the Enlightenment challenged and shook the Church far more than the persecutions of the first three centuries, and far more than the Reformation which challenged belief and doctrine and roused the Church to its need of reform, and then broke it in two rousing religious wars. For indeed, this was now an intellectual challenge which struck at the authority of the Church. What the Church did or said no longer had authority over Enlightenment thinkers, who valued their minds above God and felt they could reason out the meaning of life and what their value system should be. Their value system now focused on rational issues rather than on aesthetic values

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- such as beauty, harmony, truth, loveliness. They valued issues that could be argued out and proved. To them, therefore, ecclesiastical authority was seen as that which was imprisoning ignorant people, hence the quest for freedom and independence.
- 2 We however need to appreciate that in all the theological work done around 1982, the Belhar Confession and the WARC decision about the heresy of apartheid, there was no explicit reference to the way the doctrine of predestination gave rise to racism. It certainly gave to the Boers a grand sense of their own importance, the idea of being a chosen race, but there was not much of the theology of apartheid in it.
  - 3 It is critical to appreciate that even though Jomo Kenyatta (1889-1978) died as a believer in and a practitioner of the African religious heritage, he was however brought up in the then Church of Scotland, later, the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Africa. Both the Reformed Church of Eastern Africa and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa are said to be largely Calvinistic in their theological discourses.
  - 4 As a matter of fact, the fundamental concerns of the theology of reconstruction include: education, HIV and AIDS, democracy, human rights, environment, patriarchy, violence and poverty, among others (see Gathogo 2008b: 23-62; Villa-Vicencio 1992, Dedji 2003, Getui 1999).
  - 5 Challenged by the Marxist theory of economic determinism, Max Weber combined his interest in economics with sociology in an attempt to establish, through historical study, that historical causation was not influenced merely by economic considerations. In his work, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (1904-1905; trans. 1930), he tried to prove that ethical and religious ideas were strong influences on the development of capitalism.