

**Extremist or an enculturationist?
Retrieving Milkah Muthoni's (1948–2009) Afro-Pentecostalism**

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Abstract

Milkah Muthoni Waweru (1948–2009) played a key role in the changing theo-social landscape of central Kenya, particularly in mid 1960s, 70s and 80s, through her oral theologies which were well captured in her gospel music. In particular, her music, which is currently stored on radio cassettes and CDs, had made a huge contribution to the society. Her Afro-Pentecostal theology is also espoused in her co-founded church, the Refined Gospel Christian Church (RGCC). It deals with critical theological themes such as theodicy, ecumenism, sin, cross, holiness and healing, salvation, eschatology, and African Christian marriage. In the latter, she appears to favour polygamy whenever the need to address childlessness arises. This article also addresses the controversial birth of the RGCC; Milkah's use of figurative language; African idioms and proverbs without losing her gospel constituency. Was she an extremist in her theo-social discourses or an enculturationist? In a nutshell, the concern in this article is: How sound and relevant is Milkah Muthoni's Afro-Pentecostal theology? What were her key concerns? Did her "ministry" engage in enculturation theology, albeit unconsciously? The methodology in this article is derived from interviews conducted in 2010 by the researcher with people who were closely known to her, including her husband, Bishop John Wambu Waweru. This research was continued in October–November 2012 to clarify on some of the issues that came up after the first interviews. Extensive reading has also been done regarding some issues under discussion in order to address the various concerns.

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Introduction

This article sets out to unveil the Afro-Pentecostal theology of a leading pioneer in the gospel music industry in east and central Kenya, Milkah Muthoni Waweru (1948–2009). Indeed, Milkah became a household name in Kenya after pioneering Gospel music in east and central Kenya in the 1960s. Although she began her gospel industry at the same time as Julia Lucy Mwaura in the 1960s and 70s, Milkah appears the most unique. Why? First, she was born in the present-day Murang'a County of Kenya, got married in the present day Nyandarwa County, engaged in tailoring and market-vendor businesses in Nairobi County and finally settled, as a singer, in Kiambu County – where she finally died in 2009 at the age of 61. Second, her uniqueness is also seen in the fact that her original homeland in central Kenya was not easily identified by her music audiences, given that she had settled in various Kenyan counties; hence her music was widely accepted across the various counties of central and eastern Kenya and in various parts of the Rift Valley region of Kenya where members of Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities are predominant. Third, Milkah Muthoni's co-founding of the Refined Gospel Christian Church (RGCC) together with her husband (John Wambu Waweru), where she was the de facto theological think-tank adds to her uniqueness. Fourth, her theo-Afro-Pentecostal themes that she addresses in her gospel music made her the de facto theo-ethical counsellor of the vast region of east and central Kenya. Fifth, her ability to successfully engage culture and the gospel, without losing her gospel constituency makes her an interesting area of study in the so-called emerging Christianities of 21st century Africa.

To some, Milkah Muthoni was an extremist pioneer of gospel music who handled theological issues such as marriage, sin, eschatology, God's nature, ecumenism, theodicy and enculturation without any theological training. To others, she was not only a pioneer leader in the gospel music industry but more importantly, the real queen of enculturation in the region – a leader who attempted to navigate troubled waters with a measure of success. Enculturation, in its most basic sense, implies the attempt to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in any human situation, interacting with diverse cultures and environments. In view of this, it refers to situations in which the gospel is blended with culture as it is addressed to "peoples, groups, and [in their] socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his gospel are not known" (see John Paul II, 1996:456). Historically, the church, which was born into a Jewish world, soon found itself in non-Jewish environments; it has therefore always had to deal with the question of its relationship to the cultures in which it takes root.

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In my visit to Milkah Muthoni's co-founded RGCC, on 2 December 2012, during their 15th anniversary, I noted some distinctive characteristics. First, it is Afro-Pentecostal worship that relies on Milkah's theology and her music being played as part of the ongoing services, using potent public address systems. Second, I also noted that her legacy, despite her demise three years earlier (2009), was still fresh in the worshippers' minds as they celebrated their 15th year of her co-founded church's existence. As they made constant reference to her, one could clearly notice her ancestral role in the church. In particular, the visiting guest preacher, Bishop Samuel Wachira of the United Gospel Church of Molo, Nakuru County, began his sermon by singing one of Milkah's songs which moved the congregation greatly, as some shed tears. Coupled with this, some had Milkah's songs as their cell phone ring tones. Third, I noted that there was a general feeling that the worshippers were waiting for a special guest as they proceeded on with the service. In particular, I felt, at some stage, like someone by the name of Milkah Muthoni was going to re-join the congregation, at one stage, as the worship service proceeded.

Typology

Bryan R Wilson (1973) classifies the new religious movements (NRMs) into seven categories: (1) the conversionist response, which insists that individual and collective salvation can only come about through a profound, supernaturally wrought transformation of the self; (2) the revolutionist response, which believes that evil can only be overcome and salvation assured by divine action, thus no subjective change however profound will affect the state of the world for the better; (3) the introversionist response, which seeks salvation by withdrawing to a separate, purified community set apart from what is perceived to be an irredeemably evil world; (4) the manipulationist or gnostic response, which seeks salvation and the conquest of evil through the acquisition of the right means and techniques to deal with the problems of life; (5) the thaumaturgical response, which relies chiefly on miracles and oracles to attain salvation, and is identified as something specific such as the relief from a particular illness; (6) the reformist response, which aspires under divine guidance to overcome evil and save the world by transforming existing social structures and arrangements; and (7) the utopian response, which aims to reconstruct the world according to a set of divine principles that, if correctly applied, will result in the establishment of a world without evil. However, Wilson's typology fails to capture the dynamics that come about as a result of cultural diffusion and general societal change. Nevertheless, and as will be demonstrated in this article, Milkah Muthoni's case combines the first, the sixth and the seventh categories cited above.

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Roy Wallis's (1984) typology, on the other hand, classifies NRMs into three categories: a) world-denying or world-rejecting; b) world-indifferent, and c) world-affirming. In this case, Milkah Muthoni's theological discourses falls in the category of the world-affirming type – as it responds well to the contemporary challenges in modern Africa and in the long run seeks to be world-transforming.

Milkah Muthoni Wambu (1948–2009)

Milkah Muthoni was born in 1948 in Kigumo village, in the present day Murang'a County. She was the third-born child of Harun Macharia and Beatrice Wanjiru. She began her primary school education at Kigumo in 1955, where she went up to class four. She could not continue with schooling owing to the biting poverty that hit the locality. Coupled with this, the Mau-Mau war of independence and its insurgents, the patriarchal attitude towards girl children, and the general tension made the situation untenable. Thus, general uncertainties in the locality would not have favoured her bid for further education. Nevertheless, she helped her parents with household chores before she left for the city of Nairobi to join her elder sister, Zipporah; and where she met her future husband, John Wambu Waweru. In the mid-1960s she wanted to train as a tailor but was unable to do so; however she was able to develop her talent for gospel music, such that she was able to produce her first volume for wider consumption in early 1970s (information extracted from Milkah Muthoni's burial programme and written eulogy, 17 January 2009).

After leaving school in 1960, Milkah encountered a major turning point in her life when she joined the *Akorino* African Instituted Church; otherwise called the *Roho* or Spirit churches. Characteristically members of the *Akorino* sect are zealous in their religious discourse. Their uniqueness is seen in the fact that their male believers wear white or red turbans and women wear head-gear. They discourage singing from hymn books; rather they encourage people to master the song and “sing it from the heart as you dance your faith out” – a phenomenon that is derived from the African religious heritage. This decision irked her parents as they expected her to remain in the mainline churches, particularly the Anglican Church. Certainly, this brought about conflict and tension as two sides of the family differed on whether Milkah had made the right decision or not. Eventually this caused her to move from her Kigumo village home, Murang'a County, to the city of Nairobi where she joined her sister Zipporah. It was here in Nairobi that Zipporah, who was settled there with her husband, helped her to start a small tailoring business and she also practised singing on part-time basis. With the little she got from the tailoring business, she was able to start a vegetable

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business in the infamous Marigiti Market of Nairobi County (Waweru, 30 July 2010 and 6 November 2012).

In Marigiti Market she used to sing together with fellow vendors while waiting for the lorry to offload their goods. Subsequently, her singing group grew into a huge market choir. Grippingly, the choir had John Wambu Waweru who later married Milkah according to Kikuyu customary laws. By then Waweru like Milkah was trading in cabbages, carrots, green maize, and potatoes – all transported by lorry from the agriculturally rich Kinangop Division of Nyandarwa County to the city of Nairobi. Sometime in 1971, a European missionary from Britain, but based in Nairobi, heard her melodious singing, admired it, and subsequently in 1972 requested her to record her first album in his studio called Emi productions (Waweru, 30 July 2010 and 6 November 2012). The first song was *Ndaturaga thi-ino ndarii ta mugendi*, meaning “I had lived in this world like a stranger before I encountered Jesus”. After releasing this volume, which ironically attacked the hypocrisy in the church leadership, Milkah and her team were widely hailed as heroines and heroes – something that encouraged Milkah to understand that music can be used to communicate one's theological standpoints and eventually make a huge contribution; and thereby address the globalised African public space. Undoubtedly, it became a major turning point in her life, particularly when the songs hit the market, for they were well received in the vast regions of central, eastern Kenya and in various parts of Rift Valley where members of Gikuyu, Embu and Meru linguistic groups reside on the slopes of Mount Kenya. With John Wambu Waweru and the company of market vendors, they formed the Ofafa choir. Milkah subsequently became a fulltime gospel singer until she breathed her last. Curiously, as members of the above mentioned ethnic groups sang for political leadership under the “founding father”, Jomo Kenyatta, Milkah Muthoni and her team were busy releasing volumes of gospel music in a succession of events. This development was received with mixed reactions – as her audiences had different interpretations. Perhaps a brief exploration will shed more light on this.

First, the leadership in the mainline churches did not like her attack on their theologies – as her music was seen as attacking them directly, their leadership, their worship, the characters of leaders and sooner or later changing the theo-social landscape of the society; in particular, for challenging the socio-religious status quo. In short, her songs were seen as revolutionising ecclesiastical polities (Waweru, 30 July 2010 and 6 November 2012). Indeed, ordinary Christians across the denominational divide admired her artistry and even liked the contents that seemed to enlighten them, as they challenged the status quo. Previously, this was unimaginable. Third, the political independence celebrations were still ongoing ten years after the formal declaration of constitutional independence

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from the British on 12 December 1963. As such, artists were characteristically basing their compositions on the so-called freedom heroes, their heroic past and the future full of hope under new African leadership. Fourth, since the 1930s, during the female circumcision crisis (which was generally a conflict between culture and the gospel) in central Kenya, and during the war of independence of the 1950s and 1960s, Christians were divided into two ideological groups. That is, the culturalists or *Karing'a* Kikuyu who were seen as pro-independence group versus the fingerprints or *Kirore* Kikuyu, who were seen as collaborating Kikuyu Christians with a western approach to religiosity. In turn, the *Kirore* Kikuyu Christians were seen as being unconcerned with the African quest for self-determination and freedom; hence after independence they chose to concentrate on “other” things besides the independence celebrations (see Gathogo 2008:43–70).

Although Milkah employed various methodologies seen in the African instituted churches or the so-called Kikuyu *Karing'a* churches, her pioneering of gospel music in central Kenya at a time when people around Mount Kenya were singing for President Jomo Kenyatta (1889–1978), the freedom hero, rather than Jesus Christ, was seen, in some quarters, as a “betrayal”. That is, she was seen as a person who was singing for “others while we are singing for our own”. She however soldiered on to pioneer the gospel music industry in East and central Kenya. Subsequently, she released 70 music volumes each with approximately 13 songs; hence a total of about 1 000 songs in a period ranging from 1967 to 2009. By 2012, the market for gospel music in Kenya was flooded such that it is now difficult to imagine that in the 1960s, 70s and 80s it comprised a handful of people.

In conjunction with her husband (John Wambu Waweru), Milkah gallantly continued with her gospel music and other businesses. In her music, she was supported by Joseph Haustine Karuri, David Wanyoike Njoroge, Wangari and her husband John Wambu Waweru – who provided a melodic backing. In due course, after producing her famous hits Milkah became a household name in the above mentioned regions of Kenya. That is, *Mutunda ni wahandiruo* (the fruit bearing tree was planted), *Kurotuika uguo* (May it happen that way), *Uhoru wa muoyo ndithanganagia* (About eternal life I don't joke), *Maithori maya ndiraita* (The tears that I am shedding), *Ni aroka* (God is coming); *Tigai kumumunyana* (Stop hugging one another like little Judases), *Athuri a Kanitha* (Church elders: watch out!); *Mwathani wakwa ndeithia ndikanahotwo ni thu* (Lord help me to overcome my enemies); *Kai kwoneka atia?* (Oh! What is it that our contemporary world is experiencing?), and many others.

At this point, it is critical to show how Milkah joined the *Akorino* African Instituted Church in 1963. First, her parents, Wanjiku and Macharia, were typical adherents of African Indigenous Religion who had joined the

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fight for independence by supporting the Mau Mau freedom fighters without necessarily retreating to the forest for guerilla war – as others were doing – but supporting other fighters from their respective working stations in disguised ways. They later joined the African Independent Pentecostal Church (AIPCA) – which had been formed to protest against the Kikuyu cultural suppression in the missionary churches. Coupled with this, in 1963, Milkah left her rural Kigumo home and joined her father, who was working on the Thika coffee farms for a European settler, where she met the *Akorino* adherents. In doing so, she not only converted to Christianity but also polished her singing skills, as indeed the *Akorino* church, like most of the African instituted churches, is a singing community. Previously, while in Kigumo, Murang'a County, Milkah and other youths were taught Mau Mau songs of freedom. These “patriotic” songs in defence of the Kenyans against British colonialism later helped Milkah, after converting to Christianity, to sing with the same zeal – as she now propounded the “new religion”.

In their bid to broaden their religio-social constituency, Milkah and Waweru registered a limited company in 1995. They called it Soft Voice Productions (SVP). SVP derived its name from her soft and cool voice which was well received by the many people who listened to her music. This company fulfilled her vision of owning a music recording studio, and she acted as director there till her demise on 12 January 2009. However, she died before the government of Kenya, through the Communication Commission of Kenya (CCK), released a permit for the duo to operate a radio station. Nevertheless, their SVP records gospel music for all people who seek to work with them. It also records radio programmes, particularly for the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation.

In July 2005, Milkah was diagnosed with diabetes and high blood pressure which later caused kidney problems. For the rest of her life, she attended Upper Hill Kidney Centre in Nairobi twice a week. On 6 January 2009 she became unconscious while undergoing dialysis, and was immediately taken to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of MP Shah Hospital. Two days later, on 8 January 2009, she was discharged after making what was described as “substantial and miraculous recovery progress”. However, she became very sick the following day (9 January) and was rushed to the ICU for further dialysis. On Monday 12 January 2009, at 6 in the morning Milkah Muthoni was free at last (information extracted from Milkah's burial speeches, 17 January 2009). Of note is the fact that at the time of Milkah's death, her husband was on a two-month missionary engagement in the United States of America. As such, some of my interviewers confided to me that the immediate cause of her death was her failure to take drugs as prescribed by the doctor, particularly when her “pushy” husband was absent. In other words, in the absence of her husband, the staff at their family business could

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not manage her medical diary – as she had too much faith in miraculous healing, which is healing without necessarily taking prescribed medicine. In the words of Martin Luther King Junior (1929–1968), a person who hasn't discovered something he or she will die for "isn't fit to live" (quoted from a speech delivered in Detroit, Michigan, USA, on 23 June 1963). Milkah had discovered the need to pioneer gospel music in central Kenya at a very odd time in the national history when everyone was celebrating Kenya's political independence. She died while still working fervently to transform society through gospel music.

The birth of the Refined Gospel Christian Church (RGCC)

In 11 August 1996, Waweru began a radio programme based on Isaiah 1: 18, which says: "Come let us reason together ..." They called it *Joo Tujadiliane* or "come let us discuss or reason together". The programme was aired on state radio, the Kenya Broadcasting Co-corporation (KBC), and was sponsored by Kapa Oil Refineries Limited. Since then (1996) to date (2012) it has continued to be aired on Sundays from 8:30 to 9 am. In 2008, they began to air it on Coro FM (Kikuyu vernacular KBC Radio station) on Saturdays from 8 to 8:30 pm. Waweru used this opportunity to air Milkah's "refined theology", as was well propounded in her gospel music and her social interaction. Characteristically, the programme involved advertising the company's (Kapa Oil Refineries) products, teaching about theology from Waweru and Milkah's perspective, and of course advertising Milkah's gospel music. Methodologically, the "theology of the bible" session involved a question and answer format. In other words, the audience from all over Kenya would make live telephone calls and ask questions such as: "What is the right mode of baptism – immersion or sprinkling? How should Christian weddings be conducted? Who should rightfully partake the Holy Communion? Where is the place of a woman in the Christian family?" In his answers to these questions, Waweru, unfortunately ended up annoying a cross-section of Kenyan Christian leaders, church elders of both the NRMs and the mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic, the Methodists, the Reformed, the Presbyterians among others. He also piqued teachers in theological institutions and particularly the members of his Gospel Revival Centre (GRC) where he was the then chairman. Why? He had a very blunt way of prescribing who is, and who is not, a Christian.

In particular, he made it clear that there is only one form of biblical baptism, namely, baptism by immersion in a flowing river and not in stagnant water, dams or swimming pools. "If baptism is conducted outside a flowing river like in the case of river Jordan, where Jesus was baptised by John, then, that is not baptism at all but unreasonable mockery of what baptism is all

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about.” He went on to dismiss baptism by sprinkling as not being baptism at all. In line with Milkah’s theology, which the couple jointly propounded in the form of her gospel music, Waweru rejected the idea of requiem mass – where dead bodies were prayed for in the church. Drawing partly from Kikuyu or African customary practices where dead bodies were thrown into the bushes for hyenas to feast on; plus the biblical silence on this subject, Waweru explained that “Christ is the God of the living hence one needs to better his or her relationship with Christ while alive and not stress the bereaved family with their relatives’ delayed body that is already lifeless”. He went on,

... in Matthew 22 verse 29 to verse 32, Jesus himself says: You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead – have you not read what God said to you: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living.

In other words, their theology regarding the dead has it that people must accept death when it comes happily for “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ... for if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness” (Romans 8:1–10). After annoying a cross-section of Christians, particularly the members of their erstwhile Gospel Revival Centre (GRC), both in his weekly radio show and in Milkah’s gospel music, in which church leaders were thoroughly censured, tensions build up in the GRC. Accordingly, they found themselves with only one option – to form a refined church where their ‘polished theological’ ideas would be propounded clearly. Indeed, this ultimately happened. Hence, on 7 December 1997, the Refined Gospel Christian Church (RGCC) was born. In line with the Kenyan laws regarding the registration of society’s demands, it was registered officially on 28 November 1998. Together with Nancy Wanjiku Mwaura, David Kiromo Kiarii, Lucy Wanjiku Kariuki (Milkah’s co-wife), and Amos Mwangi Njoroge they constituted the first congregation of the newly formed church on Sunday 7 December 1997 at Kikuyu Township, Kiambu County.

Since then, the RGCC’s theological position includes belief in the Trinity, the virgin birth, the death and resurrection of Christ, the ascension, afterlife for the “refined” ones to heaven and hell for non-refined ones, manifestation of divine miracles, indwelling and baptism of the Holy Spirit, the baptism of fire, and the belief in speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 12–14).

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Another important doctrinal characteristic is that, like the African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa (AIPCA) – of which Waweru was once a member – , oil, like water, is an important component in RGCC’s liturgy. In other words, oil is poured on the candidates of priesthood, church elders or anyone who is tasked with church ministry. In short, it is used in three ways. One, when dedicating places of worship it is poured on the ground particularly when the bishop is conducting the ground-breaking ceremony (Waweru, 6 November 2012). Second, it is used when ordaining or/and commissioning priests, church elders, evangelists or for any important service of the church. Third, it is poured on a very sick person, particularly on his or her death bed. That is, a person who cannot walk to church but a person seen to be a committed member and who can also receive Holy Communion from home (cf. James 5:14). Curiously, the church does recognise women as co-workers in the ministry but they are only ordained to the level of a deacon of the church and not to the level of a bishop. It is in view of this that Milkah convinced her husband to let her play her critical leadership roles from the background. Again, Milkah was probably trying to be a “good African woman” who comes publicly under, and not above, her husband in social discourses.

Regarding the administration of the Church, the bishop is the executive director, the overall head of the church. Owing to its Afro-Pentecostal characteristics, the bishop is also controlled by the central body. He cannot for instance say, “I said” for the governing council of the church must approve major decisions after prayer, meditation and consensus building. Deriving its tendencies from the African religious heritage, the governing council avoids voting when irreconcilable differences emerge. Rather, they postpone the meeting and only return for another session of discussion when consensus emerges. Nevertheless, the bishop, who is the national chairman, sits at its headquarters at Jooi Building Centre, Kikuyu Township, Kiambu County. As the official spokesman of the church, who represents the church to the government and who also represents the church overseas, he is deputised by the assistant bishop or the church secretary.

Regarding their liturgy, the church has derived its mode of worship largely from the African heritage where oral and symbolic discourses as opposed to reliance on written publications are central. In view of this, drama and spontaneous singing is greatly emphasised as opposed to reading from the hymnbooks. As a matter of fact, members are encouraged to master their songs, even those that are found in the Golden Bells hymnbook, before they come to make presentations in the church as a sure way of “owning it in their hearts”. Again, spontaneous songs and drama, to them, appear to manifest the workings of the Holy Spirit rather than written materials. With regard to the

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delivery of sermons, the church encourages the preacher to avoid writing sermons but rather to "ask the Holy Spirit to lead them".

By December 2012, the RGCC had 16 branches across various townships of Kenya. This includes Kikuyu (headquarters), Ilasit – Loitoktok (Kajiado County), Kagio-Kirinyaga County, Kiria-Murang'a County, and Mai Mahiu-Nakuru County. In Nyandarwa County, it has centres in Karangatha, Kasuku, Njabi-ini, Ndunyu-Njeru, Ol-Karau; while in Kiambu county, it has a centre in Kamangu, and of course its headquarters. Its Kakamega county centre is in the town centre. Regarding the clergy, Bishop Wambu Waweru admitted in our 4 November 2012, interview that so far they had no college for the training of clergy but "we are on our way towards that". Their clergy cannot be trained in any college or by non-teachers from outside the RGCC. Surprisingly, like in the mainline churches, all RGCC clergy wears the clerical shirt and the so-called 'dog collar' – including the bishop. Their primary objective, which is in line with the 16th century reformation in Europe, is to preach the gospel (*sola scripture*). In addition, their clergy carries other out activities such as joining people in holy matrimony, burials, baptisms and conferences, and communal work that seeks to improve the living standards of the people. They are also tasked with the responsibility for assisting the needy such as orphans, street children, widows and the disabled. Thus, the church's role is not only establishing more churches and ordaining of pastors, but more importantly to transform people into "the true word of God", hence the refined church.

On the whole, RGCC is not just a fulfilment of Milkah Muthoni's dream of a refined church which takes care of "serious heavenly goers", but more importantly Bishop John Wambu Waweru's 1985 vision. In that vision, he reportedly saw a stream of clean water. Birds came to it to quench their thirst. They would fly around it and enjoyed the fun. Through this vision, the Holy Spirit revealed to him that God wanted him to lead the people to take that refined water; and that their lives would be completely changed. It was from there that he joined Bishop Mrima's Gospel Outreach Ministries and where, as a result of his ministry, many people were healed and others converted to Christianity (read, 'got saved'). The problems in Bishop Mrima's church after and before his death, where members worshipped their leader as their messiah, thus rekindled his 1985 vision, that he was the one and who would lead the thirsty masses to the clean and refined water. Hence he and Milkah co-founded the RGCC in 1997.

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Milkah's critical theological themes

Salvation

In her third song, volume 5, entitled *Uhonokio Mweru*, meaning "The New or Refined Salvation", Milkah uses African idioms and metaphoric language to urge her audience to get out of the misleading vehicle called "nominal salvation" (referring to the worship activities of mainline churches). She urges her audience to, instead, get into the refined one – hence the "genuine vehicle" towards heaven that has "genuine salvation". In her view, the nominal salvation does not fear God, is hypocritical, commits adultery, fornicates, lies, is immoral, dishonest, makes people confess their respective encounters with God without proof or fruits to show, and has no capacity to strengthen a person to uphold the Ten Commandments. In this recurrent theme of salvation, she explains that humanity is in its "last days", a phenomenon that is characterised by evil seemingly overtaking good in all sectors of life. Despite appearing too legalistic, Milkah and her church's concept of salvation largely follows the category of Pauline understanding – whereby salvation is seen as a process (Romans 1:16f, 9–11). In other words, the gospel means salvation for everyone who has faith but it was delivered to the Jews first and then to the gentiles (read Africans and other non-Jews).

Eschatology

Milkah Muthoni and her church's theology is both current and futuristic. It stresses the realised eschatology (present) as well as the unrealised eschatology (future). Put it differently, while the promise of future reward (such as heaven) or punishments (hell) make little impact on one who is hungry, ragged and destitute, her theology does stress the ultimate prize – the heavenly. Like in the case of Jurgen Moltmann's theology of hope (1965:16), Milkah's theology sees Christianity as forward moving and also transforming the present. To her therefore eschatological concepts are not just "the doctrine of last days"; rather, from an African religious heritage, they place much emphasis on the present as a critical component in seeking to understand the future. In turn, this puts her theo-social discourses at risk of falling into legalism. Indeed, scholars have observed that traditional African beliefs about evil and desire for deliverance and power are evident in the Pentecostal churches. Ogbu U. Kalu fittingly states that the major contribution of Pentecostalism to African Christianity is:

How they address the continued reality of the forces expressed in African cultural forms. Contrary to the early missionary atti-

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tude which urged rejection, Pentecostals take the African map of the universe seriously; accepting that culture is both a redemptive gift as well as capable of being hijacked (Kalu 2006:118).

Milkah Muthoni's understanding of the end times, as well as the second coming of Christ (*parousia*), is closely linked to Pauline theology – as seen in the books of Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians. In Thessalonians, Paul believed that the second coming of Christ and judgement would take place in his life time. There was to be the resurrection of the righteous at Parousia and the faithful would then go to heaven (1 Thess 4: 13–18). In 1 Corinthians and Romans, believers shall all be changed in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet call (1 Cor 15: 51–58). Likewise, Milkah and her church have a literal understanding of Pauline theology in this regard, for even when she fell sick, she was not keen to take modern medicine; rather, she looked upon Christ's second return with excitement. Certainly, this compares with the early Christians who went to Pepusa to wait for the return of the Lord. They abandoned their day-to-day work and went to glorify God, singing praises but after some time they found that the Lord was not returning and they went back to do their work particularly to care for their families (cf. 1 Thess 4:13–5:11). In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, St Paul gave the order of events at Parousia as follows: the Lord will descend; the dead Christians will be raised from the dead; and the living Christians will join them in the clouds. The question that logically follows is: when will the Parousia (second coming) take place? (1 Thess 5: 1–11). Milkah Muthoni echoes Paul (1 Thess 5:7) that the end day will come like a thief in a night and as a surprise just like a woman in labour birth pangs may deliver at any time; hence the need for believers to be morally and ethically prepared for this eventuality. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, Paul says that certain things must happen before the end. That is, there will be final rebellion; second, there will be lawlessness; and third, there will be restraint – a phenomenon which compares with Revelation 20 where Satan is restrained or bound for a thousand years. While St Paul could have been referring to the restrain-er as the Roman Empire, and the first, second and third century Christian persecutions, which could be coming to an end, Milkah avoided getting into such deep theological debates and introspections as that would have amounted to casting aspersions on the sanctity of the Holy Bible.

Marriage

In her fourth song, volume 5, entitled *Amombire mari eri* meaning “God created man and woman to fit into one another”, Milkah strongly denounces

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divorce. Irrespective of marital challenges, divorce cannot be justified in any way. Here, she does not give ethical guidance for abused spouses, for example battered partners, which is experienced even by men, as recent studies in Central Kenya have shown. Whatever the argument, she contended that issues such as childlessness should not be used to justify divorce especially for African Christians. Curiously, after discovering that she was barren, like her elder sister Zipporah, both of whom were allegedly cursed by an elderly neighbour following some family disagreement with their parents, she went on to advise her husband to marry “a second wife particularly one whose womb has never hosted a child. Marry her so that we can bring up the children together”, she reportedly told her husband. True to her word, she literally brought up her co-wife's children as if they were hers. In a family photo, the researcher was able to see a smiling Milkah with her co-wife, husband, and children whom she saw through to adulthood. Among other forms of support, she used her not inconsiderable savings from the sale of her music cassettes, and from her other family businesses, to promote the children's education.

By advising Waweru to marry a second woman following her barrenness, Milkah was simply attempting to demonstrate that divorce is totally unacceptable in both the African tradition and in African Christianity. Jesse Mugambi appears to echo her viewpoint when he explains the practice in African religious heritage by arguing that it is obligatory for a normal adult to marry but it is not obligatory for anyone to contract a polygamous marriage. The circumstances which necessitate the contracting of polygamous marriage “are openly discussed by the parties concerned, including the family of the man, of the additional bride, and of the first wife, these circumstances range from childlessness to the need for additional labour in the family” (Mugambi 1989:162). In Milkah's case, the reason for a co-wife was purely meant to provide children – a phenomenon which was easily justified by appealing to African culture and the Old Testament where Abraham sought to have a child with Hagar after Sarah had failed to have one.

Holiness and healing

For Milkah, holiness and healing are critical components that run concurrently. As an afro-Pentecostal, her theology captures the African ethos of wholeness where religion provides a solution to every life problem, including health and healing. In her theological standpoint, as in all afro-Pentecostal outfits, sickness is not only physical but spiritual. Additionally, physical challenges that may include barrenness, witchcraft, inter-clan or/and inter-ethnic rivalries and so forth are issues of health and holiness, which are key characteristics of emerging Christianities in Kenya. In blending the African ethos of

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wholeness with Pentecostal experience, as seen in Acts 2, the emerging Christianities in Kenya become afro-Pentecostals in genre.

In her first song, volume 5, *Mirimu ya mehia* ("Sick with sin"), Milkah invites her audience to team up with her and worship Christ, pleading that worship bypasses all forms of holiness. It heals sins and all sorts of bodily sicknesses. It tells all those who are sick "get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (referring to Jn 5:8). She adds that the holiness of Jesus heals all sorts of sicknesses, even those that modern doctors are unable to heal. In telling of the man who was an invalid for 38 years at the pool of Bethesda to pick up his mat on a Sabbath day and return home, Milkah interprets this to mean that it is the holiness that Christ read in the man's heart that led to the healing. Indeed, there were a great number of disabled people: the blind, the lame, the paralysed and so forth, but the healing of this man was as a result of his holiness which was demonstrated by his faith.

Theodicy

A theodicy is an argument for the justification of God, concerned with reconciling God's goodness and justice with the observable facts of evil and suffering in the world. It is an attempt to resolve the evidential problem of evil by reconciling the traditional divine characteristics of omnibenevolence, omnipotence and omniscience with the occurrence of evil or suffering in the world. Unlike a defence, which tries to demonstrate that God's existence is logically possible in the light of evil, a theodicy provides a framework which claims to make God's existence probable (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodicy>). In some approaches to theodicy, theologians have contended that the perfect world created by God was spoiled by human disobedience or sin. In others, God withdrew after creating the world, which then fell into decay. To others, evil is simply caused by Satan. Milkah's beliefs refer to the latter case.

In her twelfth song, volume 5, *Kuri na thina* ("There are problems in the world"), Milkah exonerates God from all forms of suffering that are experienced in the world and blames it on the devil. Generally, suffering manifests itself through massive poverty, disease, misfortunes, and wars among others. She says,

When I look around, I easily notice that there are people who cannot be brought to peace and cannot embrace other people. I see murder, hunger, drought ... and lots of problems. But I am comforted that Jesus is coming to stop the devil from misleading the creation and God's people.

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For her, the more the devil brings suffering the more Christ's second coming becomes more close. She says that the last days will be characterised by hunger, anger, and hatred, love of money, thanklessness, and disrespect among other vices – all attributable to the devil. Though claiming to quote Christ, Milkah appears to be referring to the words of St Paul in 2 Timothy 3:1–5 when he says, thus:

But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power.

By insisting that all problems in the world are caused by the devil, Milkah appears to be ignoring the fact that the fall of man in Genesis 3 resulted in God giving humanity freedom to choose their respective destinies. For example, a drunkard can easily cause road accidents and a careless medical doctor or a surgeon can cause uncalled-for deaths. Hence humanity cannot be fully exonerated from contributing to human suffering in the world, as the choices that we make always have good or bad consequences.

The cross

In Milkah's view, there are three types of crosses that are placed before humanity. One belongs to Jesus himself; and the other two belong to the two characters who were crucified with Christ (the repentant versus the condemned thief). In her view, humanity has a chance to choose between any of the three crosses. Unfortunately, only a few are ready to carry the cross of Christ as others carry the other two crosses that do not lead to salvation. Indeed, in her second song, volume 5, entitled: *Mitharaba ni itatu* ("There are three crosses"), Milkah's invites her audience to team up and carry the "good but heavier cross of Christ" as opposed to the lighter and poorer crosses of the two miserable thieves. For her, the life of a Christian is a daily struggle where Christians, like the tortoise who carries its shell, must carry "the heavy but worthy cross of Christ". The challenges that we face in the world today, in her view, are due to the fact that some are carrying the condemned thief's cross rather than Christ's cross. Hence humanity is full of murder, idolatry, corruption, fraudsters, violence and so forth. Again, since the cross of Christ is too heavy for one person to carry, only by human fellowships among brethren can the task of carrying it be accomplished. While fellowship is the

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hallmark of love and contentment in human endeavour, the thieves' crosses epitomise vices such as jealousy and ill will as opposed to faith and repentance. Hence the so-called Christians must sanctify themselves from time to time and ascertain whether they are carrying the right or the wrong cross in their daily encounters.

God's nature

In her songs, Milkah espouses an Aristotelian God who is changeless; that is, the unmoved mover who conversely moves other things, but is not itself moved by any prior action. She captures this viewpoint in her tenth song, volume 8, *Ndagarurukaga* ("God doesn't change"), where she postulates that God hasn't changed since the time of Noah, Lot, Shadrach and Daniel. She goes on to explain that God in Christ will not change in his *parousia* (second coming). Human beings are products of the changeless God. Nevertheless, the changeless God blesses barren women with children, gives rain to all, harvests, wealth, healing, and so forth. This however poses a theological contestation regarding the "changeless God". In other words, does the God who punished people during Noah's time exact penalties in the same way in the 21st century? Have the changing scientific breakthroughs in the 21st century affected how Christians perceive God? Isn't a changeless God an idol? In light of Milkah's theological standpoint, how can Christians appropriately exegete Isaiah 55:8–9 where God says: "for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways ... As heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts?" If God's thoughts and ways transcend human understanding in incomparable measure, how then can Milkah's theology of a changeless God be comprehended? How can it be reconciled with Jurgen Moltmann's theology of the "suffering God", where only "The Crucified God [or the movable God] rewards"? (see Moltmann 1993). Certainly, Aristotle's "unmoved movers" are, themselves, immaterial substance (separate and individual beings), having neither parts nor magnitude. As such, it would be physically impossible for them to move material objects of any size by pushing, pulling or collision.

Sin

In her songs, Milkah explicitly mentions sin by name: adultery, divisions in the church, love of money, hatred, hypocrisy, suppressing other people and, more importantly, failure to be good Samaritans to our neighbours (refer to Luke 10: 30–36). Even though she was not conscious of it, she evidently affirms Karl Rahner's view of the "anonymous Christian" for she espouses

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the view that persons are saved if they open themselves to God and to others, even if they are not clearly aware that they are doing so. For Milkah, one major sin is the negation of one's fellow human being. When you character assassinate, gossip or simply backbite your brother or your sister, you commit a sin; just as when you neglect to feed the hungry person. Sin demands radical liberation which in turn necessarily implies a holistic salvation.

In her eleventh song, Volume 5, she tells her audiences to run away from the "idol of money" so that "we are not wiped out with it during the parousia (Christ's second coming)". She explains that money like the serpent (Genesis 3) in the garden of paradise ought to be avoided. Without clear proof, she additionally points out that the devil has come in the form of money thereby misleading people throughout the world. She however fails to show how money can be avoided altogether without hurting ourselves in an era where it is the only legitimate trading commodity. Again, the need to keep the balance regarding the good and bad side of money is critical. By avoiding the biblical verses where Jesus advises his audiences to give to Caesar what is his and to God as well (Mt 22:21), Milkah does not adequately provide theo-ethical guidance on the subject.

Milkah in her song, *Mugendi* ("Sojourner"), the 14th song in volume 5, explains that there is no big or small sin. Christians must uphold perfection for God is perfect; an iota of sin will block Christians from their heavenly pursuits. Certainly, the legalistic nature of Milkah's position creates the impression that on their own, human beings can work for their own salvation. It however appears to contradict the Pauline approach in that "the just shall live by faith" (Ro. 1:17) and not by works.

Ecumenism

The word "ecumenism" can be defined as "the organised attempt to bring about the cooperation and unity of all believers in Christ". This unity doesn't mean uniformity but a belonging, like members of a family – each having the freedom to be different, yet still united as a family. According to Kenneth Shouler, the nonreligious vernacular for the word "ecumenical" is "general in extent or influence". In short, ecumenism is the antidote (or remedy) to what appears as narrow, and even dogmatic, sectarianism.

As in the words of William Temple (1881–1944) of the Church of England and later the Archbishop of Canterbury, "The ecumenical movement is the great new fact of our era", Milkah, in her afro-Pentecostal theology, sees the unity of churches as the real manifestation of God. She sees the coming together of "people of God" as the potent way of conquering the evil powers in the world. Indeed, the exciting thing in the promise of the

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ecumenical movement is that after centuries of separation and hostility, Christians have begun, in Temple's words, to capture "the simple biblical truth that the church of the people of God and the body of Christ must exemplify in the world how God gathers people together from the ends of the earth to live as a new humanity". Cooperation, not separation, becomes the operating concept.

To this end, Milkah demonstrates the need for ecumenism in her ninth song, volume 6, when she says that real worship is best seen "when believers are in unity". This unity keeps "the devil's power away" as it is "Christ who said that miracles and signs will follow all believers in their unity". Here, she is referring to John 17: 20–26 where Jesus prays that "all of them may be one" (verse 21). As an African Christian, Milkah is speaking from the perspective that African indigenous society discouraged people from living in isolation; hence the saying, *muria wiki akuaga wiki* (he who eats alone dies alone). This means that if persons ate together and by coincidence died, they would have been seen to have died together happily and in everlasting fellowship.

Similarly, Jesse Mugambi, in his *From Liberation to reconstruction* (1995:196), laments the fragmentation of the African church. He explains thus:

Christian denominationalism has often brought conflict, confusion and tension in families and communities in Africa. On this continent, each denomination markets itself as 'The Church,' without emphasizing that it is an ecclesiastical 'brand', 'type' or 'model' ... Freedom without responsibility is anarchical. Likewise, freedom without limits is self-destructive.

In his co-edited book with Laurenti Magesa (1998:7), *The Church in African Christianity*, Mugambi explains further that Christians do not have an option over the question of Christian unity.

In the teachings of both Jesus and Paul, the unity of the church is emphatically mandated. Christians are challenged to shed their differences and interests for the sake of Christian unity. The centre of that unity is Jesus Christ, and all Christians without exception are challenged to focus their identity on Jesus rather than on any apostle, saint or doctrine.

Seen from this perspective, the church participates in the uniting of men with one another, in the uniting of society with nature, and in the uniting of

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creation with God. In other words, it is the participation in the history of God's dealings with the world.

The use of figurative language

On the whole Milkah use figurative language borrowed from the African heritage to communicate her afro-Pentecostal theology. A few illustrations will suffice: in her seventh song, volume four, *Omuthenya ndigaguraga* ("What I do on daily basis"), Milkah explains that she "eats God's word daily". She says "everyone who eats useless things" will be eternally condemned. If our focus is heavenward then one must ensure that he or she doesn't lie, backbite or be full of hatred, as the end result would be "Cain's judgement".

Another heavy use of African symbolism interwoven with the gospel message is seen in her call for "children of God to be patient" regardless of the difficulties faced in the course of their heavenly pursuits. For it is only "a few minutes remaining before the sun sets or before it gets to dawn". She warns people whose "breakfasts are ungodly things" there will be no eternal salary. She continues to explain in volume four: "every day, I normally feed on God's word as my breakfast, lunch and supper. It is my food and drink ... in so doing, I strive for everlasting life".

In her fifth song, volume 3, *Ndumyu ya tuhu mutheri* ("A free market") Milkah sees the whole world as the free market of Christ. In this market, she says, we get goods without buying as Christ has made salvation a commodity that is not for sale. She however fails to appreciate St Pauls' assertion that one must work for one's own salvation; hence there is, in a sense, a cost attached to salvation (refer to Php 2:12). Nevertheless, she sees a free market where people from all walks of life regardless of their origin, status, creed and so on are served fairly in this free market without any discrimination whatsoever. Indeed, by using the African symbolism of a market to describe the mission of Christ, Milkah intended to show her broad understanding of God's mission to humanity. In other words, a market is open to Africans, Europeans and Arabs, rich and poor, and virtually everyone who needs commodities gets them in the marketplace. In an African context, it is a place where even the beggars are taken by their relatives to seek the stranger's hospitality particularly when poverty overwhelms the concerned family. It is the place where people make wealth. Ironically, it is a place where even pickpockets, false teachers, conmen, mad persons and even the so-called malcontents of society assemble. In short, a marketplace is an assembly point for all categories of people. In her view thus, Christ's market has all the products that we may need; hence the better option.

Milkah Muthoni as the conscience of society

In her seventh song, volume 9, *Nyungu ya Ngai* ("God's pot"), Milkah compares God's salvation to a boiling pot that will never stop even if church elders or/and priests deviate from their stated mission. In other words, no human being can control God's boiling pot. She criticises church elders for their self-righteousness (Mt 23), hence condemning and judging others rather than leaving it to God. She says:

The work of church elders is not to identify who is and who is not a sinner. What you do ought not to be for your own sake but for God's sake. Who made you judges over others; yet your life situations are worse off? And because of your many sins of omission and commission yours is a case of forest of sins. Stop getting jealous when you see other peoples talents in the church; hence you suppress youthful talents that you find emerging. Take care: if you are not able get one go on your knees and plead to God to remember you; otherwise take care for God has never lacked people to work with. In God's cooking pot placed under God's three stones all will be well. So be warned that God will get other people to handle the cooking pot with or without you. God is never in shortage of people to work in God's vineyard!

She goes on to say,

The reason why some church elders have no charismatic gifts for service to God and humanity is because of the many side-show issues that have befogged their fellowships with God. Hence when you see a [youthful] person full of the Holy Spirit trying to bring people together and share the grace of God, you then get jealous, chase them or even seek to destroy them altogether. You call them sinners, drunkards ... Who told you to be investigating sinners in church? Don't you know that God's fire is sustained by hard dry wood that burns the cooking pot effectively? Hence with or without your jealousy, God's pot will still cook. In any case, God can destroy you without mercy. But if you humble yourselves before God, you will acquire the best of this world. The reason why some church leaders do not have supernatural gifts is because of their uncleanlines. If they change, God will work with them.

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In being very critical of church elders, Milkah risked appearing judgemental and legalistic. In turn, it can be asked: who gave her the mandate to interrogate the role of church elders? How did she arrive at her respective theological positions? In her assessment of church elders was she actually theologically wrong?

Undoubtedly, Milkah is uniquely able to deal with the messes in society and particularly among so-called Christians. In her second song, volume 9, *Tuika memba* ("Be a member") she tells society that membership of a church or of any social organisation is only meaningful when one lives up to the expectations of the particular group. She maintained that there was a huge increase in church attendance for selfish reasons. Some want the church to provide employment, others want recognition, and others are looking forward to the prospect of a decent burial when they finally die and others are looking for material benefits – and not heavenly pursuits. Ironically, she says, "they carry big bibles on Sundays", appearing holy outwardly, yet their moral conduct is wanting on the other six days of the week. She says, "to be baptised or to be confirmed or to be a partaker of the Holy Eucharist is a good thing; but the most important of all is to be a member of the heavenly kingship". Like prophet Jeremiah of the Old Testament, Milkah generally cautions on the rottenness of society but goes on to give hope that the wrath of God can still be avoided through repentance.

Conclusion

The article began by locating Milkah Muthoni's roots. It proceeded to show how she grew from a little known village girl to a leading pioneer in the gospel music industry in Kenya, releasing about a thousand songs. The article has attempted to bring out key theological themes in her gospel music; including God's nature, sin, holiness, salvation, eschatology, ecumenism, the cross, theodicy, and holistic healing. Of interest is her soft spot for polygamy for African Christians despite her strong Pentecostal theological leanings and convictions. In advising her husband to get a second wife upon discovering her barrenness she demonstrated her Afro-Pentecostal perspective – whereby she practised Pentecostal Christianity, where gifts of the Holy Spirit were openly manifested, but also appreciated some elements of African culture. Certainly, her songs are full of African imagery, proverbs, riddles and figurative language.

On the whole, Milkah's contribution as an enculturationist portrays her as one who was ahead of her time; and even though her theological discourses portray her as an extremist, she clearly attempted to navigate the troubled waters in that African theologians had not yet given enough attention to enculturation theology in the 1960s and 70s as they later did. This

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concern for enculturation has become the defining characteristic of African theology in the second half of the 20th century, as well as the 21st century for that matter; and is being addressed by Christians throughout the world. Consequently, in the enterprise of enculturating Christianity in Africa, theology must not ignore pertinent insights from other parts of the world church, as Milkah gallantly demonstrated in some of her discourses where culture and the gospel are seen to be in constant dialogue. Interestingly, she shares this view with John Paul II; who, in 2007, exhorted the church in Africa to consider enculturation as “one of the greatest challenges for the church on the Continent on the eve of the Third Millennium” (see Pope John Paul II, 2007).

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