



## Gender and Christology in Africa for social and political involvement

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### Abstract

The person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the central tenets of the Christian mystery. The theological reflection upon the meanings of these is summed up in Christology. This paper seeks to explore the inspiration derived from feminist Christologies by women in Africa for social and political participation. The emphasis of feminist Christologies on the African continent is how one understands the life of Jesus and how that understanding can help alter present circumstances and be empowered to fight for change. Feminist Christologies in this paper arise from its significance in women's daily lives. Using the cases of Bishop Margaret Wanjiru of Jesus is Alive Ministries (JIAM) and the late Catholic Prof. Sister Anne Nasimiyu, this paper proceeds to tease out their understanding of the life of Jesus and how from a gender perspective they found this useful for women's social and political involvement. As shall be demonstrated, feminist Christologies are compactly intertwined with women's social, political and contemporary lived realities and also serve to empower them.

### Keywords

*Gender; feminism; Christology; Margaret Wanjiru; Sister Anne Nasimiyu*

### Introduction

It is well known in theological circles that the term “feminist” is not used by all women theologians all over the world. There are differences as to how the term “feminist” is viewed in various social locations. Yet, owing to the pluralistic nature of feminist theology, and that it is not a systematically developed body of received knowledge handed down in theological institutions, women's action and reflection as Christians have been called

by a variety of names, such as “womanist” by African American women, “women’s liberation theology” by many in Africa and “mujerista” theology by Hispanic women, while for others it is merely “feminist theology”. In this article, the term “feminist Christology” in a manner to encompass theological reflection on the person and deeds of Jesus Christ coming from all the above-mentioned groups.

For the purpose of advancing in this article, we adopt the criterion for a feminist Christology as expounded by Lisa Isherwood. She contends that feminist Christology is positioned within a liberative approach where the concern is how one understands the life of Jesus can help alter present circumstances and how one may be empowered to fight for change (Isherwood 2001:11). Using two examples of a female Pentecostal church founder in Kenya and an Associate Professor, this article proceeds to tease out their understanding of the life of Jesus and how this is useful for women’s political and social change. The two women are Bishop Margaret Wanjiru of Jesus is Alive Ministries and the late Sister Anne Nasimiyu.

## **The quest for and concerns of feminist Christologies**

Feminist Christologies have their roots within feminist theology. But what prompted the start of feminist Christology and what are its main concerns? The theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether aptly states, “Christian feminist theology thus finds the reconstruction of Christology both the most central and the most difficult of its tasks” (Ruether 1996:26–27). Perhaps clear manifestations are the different ways of proceeding in reconstructing Christologies thus, the multiplicities inherent within feminist Christologies.

Feminist theologians cry foul when it comes to traditional Christology, which they consider problematic in various ways. First, the particularity of Jesus is scandalous for some feminist theologians to whom the confessions of “God’s only son, our Lord” Jesus is difficult to embrace. Mary Daly questions the notion of one eternal God, creator of the heavens and the earth, who could come to dwell in one Jewish male carpenter. For Daly, it is this Christ image that has legitimated sexual hierarchy within Christian history (Daly 1986:71–72). Jesus’ maleness has been emphasized to the detriment of women, whereas his Jewishness is downplayed.

Second, the gender of Jesus as proclaimed and emphasized poses one such problem. According to the theologian Mary Daly (1986), Jesus' maleness defies the male and makes his rule over women his divine right. Her charge is "If God is male then male is God" (Daly 1986:71–72), adding that for women to declare with Chalcedon that Jesus is fully man and fully divine is to dangerously play into the hands of the oppressors (Daly 1986).

Third, the cross of Jesus Christ poses problems for some feminist theologians. They maintain that the cross is a site of terror, which promotes violence and should be bypassed all together. The womanist theologian Delores Williams insists that the image of Jesus dripping blood glorifies unjust suffering, and as such the cross must be confronted as a symbol of evil that justifies genocide and slavery (Williams 1991:2–14). Williams suggests that a way to bypass the cross is to focus on the life and prophetic ministry of Jesus, which is redemptive, as opposed to his death on the cross.

Fourth, the image of Christ has been the preserve of males, especially as understood in the Roman Catholic fraternity. In this fraternity, the priest images or represents Jesus in the Eucharistic feast, represents Christ more adequately than a female; and it is from this idea that Catholic feminist theologians like Elizabeth Johnson and Kari Børresen have emphasised on the Christomorphic capacity of both females and males (Johnson 1992:151; Børresen 1995).

To deal with the scandal of particularity, the feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether contends that only Jesus' maleness has been particularised. However, neither his Jewishness nor his physical presence in a 1st century community is particularised. As such, his maleness is used to keep women away from meaningful participation in the church. In order to deal with this scandal, the particularity of Jesus Christ needs to be admitted and dealt with. A way of doing this is to meet Jesus in all his particularity, as a first century Jew and a male. In so doing, Ruether opts to apply Jesus' universal redemption to both female and male and to people of all ethnicities (Ruether 1998:93). In effect, Ruether moves the importance of Jesus to his message and not his biology. In sum, these are some problematic issues inherent within traditional Christology that feminist theologians attempt to address by introducing feminist Christologies.

## **Localising feminist Christologies on the African continent**

Church historians, liberation and feminist theologians have traced numerous conflicting tendencies throughout the Christian tradition and history which attest to the position that Christology is not monolithic (Hopkins 1994:76; Ruether 1983:116–138; Isherwood 2002: 12). Therefore, a universal Christology is not possible, since people from different cultural and socio-economic contexts have different existential needs and their understanding of what salvation is and how it is to be realised differs. Christologies are connected with context and also with the sort of aspirations for salvation a community may have; therefore, one must accept that all Christologies are contextual (Hopkins 1994:11; Isherwood 2002:12).

Since no single theology can claim to be valid for all times and places, contextual interpretation must be local and diversified. On the African continent, some of the problems of traditional Christology are not seen as entirely problematic. Of the four listed above, for feminist theologians in parts of Africa the maleness of Christ is not a problem. For such theologians, it is an advantage for them that Jesus, a man, would be concerned with women of his time at all. These theologians point out that Jesus born as a man was best able to challenge male privilege and offer a more moving challenge to men to change their ways.

For feminist theologians on the continent of Africa, the scandal of particularity – that Jesus was a first century male and a Jew – seems not to be a scandal at all. In the world of feminist theologians in some developing countries, that Jesus is male serves the function of inspiring counter-cultural actions that strive for the dignity of women in a patriarchal world. These theologians overcome the particularity problem by asserting that Jesus was a man quite unlike others of his time and culture since he embraced women and included them in his ministry and message. Virginia Fabella is not concerned that Jesus, the fully liberated human being, was male, and as such the scandal of particularity is not a scandal in her perspective. To her, the maleness of Jesus is a historical accident rather than an ontological necessity in the liberation process (Oduyoye and Fabella 1988:113).

## **Feminist Christologies in Kenya and its impact for political and social change**

Since the concern of feminist Christology in Kenya is how one's understanding of the life of Jesus can help alter present circumstances and how one may be empowered to fight for change, we start off in this article from the lived realities of women. We use the cases of one female Pentecostal leader, Bishop Margaret Wanjiru and the late Catholic theologian Prof. Sister Anne Nasimiyu to tease out trajectories of change as an individual in the Kenyan social and political spheres.

### **Introducing Margaret Wanjiru and JIAM**

Margaret Wanjiru was born in 1961 into a polygamous family in Kahuguini, Kiambu Kenya. As a youth, she was a member of the Anglican church of Kenya. Since her father was an alcoholic, her mother had to fend for the family. They found themselves impoverished and having to live within Nairobi's Kangemi slums where she grew up in poverty even as her mother made and sold illicit brews to educate and feed the children. Kangemi slums are located in a small valley on the outskirts of Nairobi city, on the road connecting Nairobi and Naivasha. It has a population of approximately over 150,000 people and its southern border connects with another large slum known as Kawangware.

It is important to note that living in extreme environments like slums impacts on sexual and reproductive health. This is essentially so, since slum communities are often characterized by a lack of basic infrastructure, high risk of sexual and gender-based violence, high levels of substance abuse, poor livelihood opportunities and poor schooling facilities, all of which negatively impact young women aged between 15–22 years (Beguy *et al.* 2014). In general, it has been indicated that over 13,000 girls drop out of school annually due to early childbearing (Muganda-Onyando *et al.* 2008).

By the age of sixteen, Wanjiru had become pregnant. Before she knew what was happening, she conceived the second time despite the many warnings she had received from her mother (Kalu 2008:150). It would seem that all was lost and that she was never going to make it in life. Wanjiru's mother took up to raise her two children even as she returned to school to complete

her elementary education. Later she ended up doing some cleaning and enrolled into a marketing diploma course. In March 1991, Wanjiru attended a crusade by the Nigerian preacher, Emmanuel Eni where she converted and turned away from the path she had earlier walked (Kalu 2008:151). Eni is a Nigerian evangelist renowned for his book *Delivered from the powers of Darkness* (Eni 1987).

Her conversion to become a follower of Jesus came along with many changes. Her resolute persuasion to believe the message of the gospel and to share how Jesus speaks to her has a Christological orientation in two ways: first, her understanding of the person of Jesus is seen in the way she accepted the salvific message of the gospel. Her acceptance of this gospel, whose main message is the work of Jesus Christ, made her life turn around as she clearly attests repeatedly in her messages and sermons.

At the same time, a second Christological orientation is her persuasion to make Jesus known to others. She started small meetings in the streets of Nairobi. Jesus is Alive Ministries (JIAM) was founded by Bishop Margaret Wanjiru in September 1993. Currently it has a membership of over 11,000 members.<sup>1</sup> In 1997 she was ordained a minister, and in 2002 a Bishop by Archbishop Arthur Kitonga of the Redeemed Gospel Church. This position, combined with her political interests, ushered her even more into the limelight. Her quest to make known aspects of her Christological positions has grown over time so that JIAM has ventured into diaspora communities of Uganda, South Africa, United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. Besides being a televangelist, she also has over twenty-two other services during the week, each drawing large crowds. She can be said to have challenged the conservative Pentecostals who restrict the levels of women's ritual status (Kalu 2008:151–152). It is clear that her Christological orientations have led Margaret Wanjiru to encourage and empower fellow women (Kalu 2008:149). Similarly, she has become empowered and encouraged as an individual.

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1 See. [Online]. Available: <https://www.jiam.org> [Accessed:1.3.16]

## **Wanjiru and women's social and political participation in Africa as inspired by feminist Christologies**

Wanjiru's reflection of feminist Christology can be gleaned from her sermons. According to her, in 1998 she almost hit rock bottom, lost everything; her finances and her social status and she almost shut down JIAM. This is when the Lord spoke to her to make a certain kind of prayer, "show me your glory". In Wanjiru's own life story, she gives theological content to the belief in the presence of the "glory of God". It is noted that Wanjiru's life story which traces her rise from extreme poverty and difficulty to where she is now, suggests an element of some visible "glory" or success. In part, she reflects what people desire in terms of their own hopes for success. Presently, she somewhat embodies what glory that may be thought to be in individual lives. Indeed, for her, to appear on TV and for having become a TV personality in Kenya, shows existentially that it is possible for a girl to start off from the slums of Nairobi and later become a TV personality in their own rights.

As earlier indicated, feminist Christology is positioned within a liberative approach where the concern is how Wanjiru understands the life of Jesus, and how this has helped to alter her present circumstances. Further, it considers how she may be empowered to fight for change for herself and others. It is Wanjiru's understanding of the life of Jesus which empowered her to start up a ministry. This ministry plays a social role by participating in care-giving and offers various forms of assistance for families through counselling, mentorship, marriage programmes thus impacting many. It is clear that her motivation for offering social support, spiritual support and solidarity to the communities emanates from her Christological understanding.

The location of her church, in downtown Nairobi makes it accessible by the down-trodden, the many who lack the comforts of life and can hardly make ends meet. Such are those who seek a way out of the injustices that society and the political class has continued to put them through. The accessibility provided by JIAM over the years makes its impact in the Kenyan society felt.

Further, Wanjiru, as a female Pentecostal Church Leader, manages the desires and beliefs of her audiences through religious programmes which enhance social participation and solidarity among women in Kenya. This alters the present circumstances of not only her followers but of herself, granted the value of philanthropy and giving. As ritual processes that impact on society in socially complex ways, her ministry functions as a social responsibility system, and a system of intervention, for, with, and on behalf of women.

It is clear that Wanjiru's ministry has a liberative approach, as it importantly impacts on the production of a variety of forms of social relations, that patterns social cohesion among women, and as such, also impacting society more broadly speaking. The impact on Kenyan society allows for persons in her congregation and herself to self-actualize and demand for change. This is empowering for herself and for those she leads in multiple ways. Wanjiru has managed to found and propagate her ministry through televangelism, and through it, to encourage and empower fellow women (Kalu 2008: 149).

On the political scene, Wanjiru has ventured where not many have dared.<sup>2</sup> Many Christians in Kenya and especially women have shied away from political leadership, citing it as one that corrupts. Wanjiru states that she is Christian and as a follower of Christ; she has Godly values which she carries along with her into different arenas. In a televised show (Maseno 2017), she states that one can be a politician and also a Christian. She asserts that she is principled even on the campaign trail and will not conform to dance to all kind of music played on the campaign trail. She insists to only dance to gospel music.<sup>3</sup>

When asked how she manages the two roles of Bishop and politician, she states that it is biblical to be leader and a Bishop.<sup>4</sup> She says that Deborah in Judges 5 was a prophet and a mother who later became a politician.

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2 This article opens room for further deeper engagement in religion and politics as demonstrated by Wanjiru. Indeed, what is highlighted above is but a broad overview.

3 See One on One chat with Bishop Wanjiru on Citizen TV [Online]. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71\\_RnO-WUoc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71_RnO-WUoc) [Accessed: 27.02.2018].

4 See Women in leadership on Citizen TV. [Online]. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mob\\_uZC8R20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mob_uZC8R20) [Accessed: 27.02.2018]

Her Christology informs her that whether in politics or whether she is preaching, both of these are callings. She adds that even on her campaign trail she preaches and prays for people. The people come out to her and ask her to pray for them before she leaves, which she gladly does. For her she is ministering to people consistently.

Wanjiru decided to run for a parliamentary seat in 2007. Granted her spheres of influence in popular culture, her later political achievements included contesting and winning the Starehe parliamentary seat (2007). In 2013, she was locked out of the gubernatorial race due to lack of sufficient academic papers. She later vied for the position of Senator of Nairobi (2013) which she lost and most recently, contesting and losing as Governor of Nairobi (2017).<sup>5</sup> Wanjiru's life story demonstrates the impact of feminist Christology on women's social and political participation in Kenya.

For Wanjiru as a Pentecostal ministry leader, her understanding of the life of Jesus and related rituals enable her to administer equally. These Christ-related Church rituals have meaning not only for her audience, but also reflexively, for herself. They provide spiritual support and foster solidarity with the communities comprising her congregation members. They also importantly serve as tools of empowerment, through a process through which she encourages her members and audiences to take up social responsibility for themselves, their families and communities, and, in so doing, to cultivate social cohesion with dignity, self-respect, and integrity.

## Introducing Sister Anne Nasimiyu Wasike<sup>6</sup>

Nasimiyu Wasike was an associate professor of systematic theology in the Religious Studies Department at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya. She was a member of the Religious Institute of Little Sisters of St. Francis. She held a Doctorate from the United States of America, Duquesne

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5 Perhaps Wanjiru's entry into the political arena is not only motivated by a feminist Christology. It could also include her motivations, self-actualization and her personal ambitions. It is clear that her engagement in the political arena is firm regardless of the times she has lost her bid. This remains a topic for another article.

6 This section is a tribute to the late Sister Nasimiyu who as a mentor, played a role in my PhD level research on widow's Christologies. In her generosity, she granted me interviews in Eldoret, Kenya in 2006.

University, Pittsburgh. Her doctoral dissertation on *Problems raised in the process of inculturation and the impact of Vatican II*, related Catholic theology to traditional African religion and culture. Her insistence was that to inculturate the Christian message into African cultures is to be able to establish a creative process in which a new Christian culture gradually emerges. To Wasike, the task of inculturation includes a careful discernment of the valid elements of the African people's way of life so as to incorporate them into the Christian message, and a rejection of all those elements which rob people of their freedom of thought and render them passive recipients of directives concerning what they are allowed, where and under what circumstances.

In general, she noted that Christianity had the duty to take all peoples and their cultures seriously since it is charged with the responsibility and duty of evangelising cultures through a gradual process, which denounces evil structures within those cultures in order to give a Christian interpretation of the customs and religious character of the variety of cultures on the face of the earth.

By the mid-nineties, she was an associate professor at the department of Religious Studies at Kenyatta University in Kenya. From 1992 to 1998, she served as the General Superior of the Little Sisters of St. Francis. Nasimiyu was part of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians who formed the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture. She served as a convenor of the Kenyan National Circle of concerned African women theologians. Her range of theological concerns covered Christology, African Independent Churches, the Prophetic Vocation of African Women, Polygyny and Women in African culture.

Before her demise, Nasimiyu was working on topics such as women in religion, Christology, and women within African Traditional religions. She was buried in Uganda where she had served as for many years before.

### **Wasike and women's social and political participation in Africa as inspired by feminist Christologies**

The late Nasimiyu was a Kenyan theologian who made significant contribution to feminist Christology on the continent. Her array of writings

contends that from African women's faith expressions, we encounter Christologies that derive from experience (Nasimiyu 2005). She adds that women's experience as previously exemplified, the Kenyan woman seeks to harmonise the supernatural and her everyday life. According to Nasimiyu,

Christology is a place where we envision the redemption from all sin and evil. It is a symbol which encompasses our vision of our authentic humanity and the fulfilled hopes of all human persons ... Christology is the most understandable symbol of redemption in Christian theology because Christ is the focus of Christian faith (Nasimiyu 1989:129).

Following interviews conducted by Nasimiyu about women's experiences in relation to Jesus, several factors emerge. These include: their Christian concepts of Jesus which they learnt from their catechism, their holistic view of life where Jesus affects their whole life, their belief in the reality of evil powers from which Jesus has to save them and the courage to suffer and endure hardships with the hope that soon all these will be over (Nasimiyu 1989:126).

Feminist Christology for Kenyan women, as explained by Nasimiyu, affects the whole of life, grants them the courage to endure the hardships of life and at the same time fight for change. In these interviews with different women, it was clear that their social lives and political lives were interlinked with their Christology.

For Nasimiyu, the Kenyan women's experience demonstrates a Christology that is based on a holistic worldview. She needs a Christ who affects the whole of her life.<sup>7</sup> Nasimiyu points out Christological models that emerge in African women's reflections as eschatological, anthropological, liberational and cosmological models.

In the eschatological model, Christ in his suffering took on the conditions of the African woman and the conditions of the whole humanity. Within

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<sup>7</sup> Further, through ethnographic studies in rural Kenya, Maseno-Ouma demonstrates among widows how their understanding of the person of Jesus is transformative to their suffering and challenges. She captures widows' empowerment through the transportation of lineage and their naming of Jesus Christ. These feminist Christologies amongst widows are what they live by and have an impact on their social and political engagements (Maseno-Ouma 2014).

this model, it is clear that in his resurrection, the African women are called to participate in the restoration of harmony, equality and inclusiveness in all human relationships in the family, society and church. This involvement takes shape in various forms even as Kenyan women take strides to participate actively in the social and political spheres.

In the anthropological model, God calls us in Christ to a life which is dedicated to the love of the neighbour. The African women's experience of nurturing life and putting others first is taken note of. Jesus takes on the qualities of a mother. She points out that Jesus demonstrates the qualities of a mother not only to women but also to all male and female disciples. Jesus is a nurturer of life, especially the life of the weak. Jesus' motherhood is characterized by nourishment, protection and care for the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed and the marginalized. Therefore, he is a nurturer of life. Indeed, the way Jesus related to the people and especially to the disciples, showed a warm tenderness, care, interest and a readiness to restore life to an integrated wholeness. However, "though Jesus takes on the qualities of a mother, women should not be seen as merely child bearers" (Nasimiyu 1989:131).

In the liberational model, Christ asks the African woman not to fatalistically accept her hardships and pain but to work at getting rid of the sufferings and creating a better place for all. The feminist Christological impetus here motivates Kenyan women to engage in the social and political spheres for the liberation of all people.

As for the cosmological model, Christ is the cosmological restorer. Jesus initiated the restoration of individuals and societies to wholeness. Christ's healing of people is nearer to the African reality and speaks especially to the women, who nurture the sick back to health (Nasimiyu 1989:131). In his life, Jesus endeavoured to restore individuals and the societies to wholeness (Nasimiyu 1989:133). In general, according to Nasimiyu, for Kenyan women, "Jesus Christ is the victorious conqueror of all spiritual forces; He is the nurturer of life and totality of their being. Christ is the liberator of the sufferers, the restorer of all those who are broken, the giver of hope and courage to be" (Nasimiyu 1989:134).

## Conclusion

A focus on end times hides the relevance of Christ in the business of living today and in the immediate future. Such a Christology is not updated to the task of empowering women for life in Kenya and Africa today. Indeed, in the light of the African worldview, a holistic view of life is presented which is also integrated in feminist Christology in Africa. Feminist Christology in Africa is one that affects the whole of life and shows that there is nothing in the life of African women that is not the business of God in the now.

The concern of feminist Christology in Kenya is how the understanding of the life of Jesus can help one to be empowered to fight for change. For both Margaret Wanjiru and Anne Nasimiyu, the Christ whom African women worship, honour and depend on is the anointed one who liberates from all oppression, the companion, friend, teacher and, caring compassionate nurturer of all. He is also the servant that washed the feet of the disciples and the reconciler. This article has shown that for both Wanjiru and Nasimiyu, their feminist Christologies continue to take a central stage in their engagement within the social and political arena with the aim of altering present circumstances, and those of other women around them. Through their engagement, it is clear that many are encouraged, including themselves to press for positive change in society.

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