Local Theologies on the World Wide Web: Various Uses of the Internet for the Study of Theology in Africa[1]

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Abstract

Although widespread internet usage across Africa enables access to fresh primary, secondary and archival materials for the study of theology, these internet-based resources have not yet been properly utilised for the benefit of academic study and research. Making use of appropriate examples, this article introduces three areas through which the internet provides essential resources for theological research: primary sources, secondary sources and repositories for archives and collections. This article examines each of these three areas and locates this topic within the wider context in which the internet has become a central aspect of scholarly research for various academic fields.

Keywords*: internet; research methodology; African theology; primary resources; secondary resources; archival resources; local theologies*

Introduction

In Sub-Saharan Africa, access to and the use of smartphone devices with internet access, continues to expand rapidly (Wilson & Wong, 2007). Many people's lives now depend on their ability to use various services that are provided by internet-based companies. These developments have also had a major impact on theological studies and research. Although it is challenging for both researchers and students to keep up with the ever-widening possibilities, these developments also represent a huge opportunity on a continent with limited availability to printed sources and with few well-developed research libraries. In terms of their use of the internet for academic research, students of theology in Africa do not appear to have kept pace with their counterparts in other academic disciplines across the continent (Toure, 2016; Cheung, 2012; Elder & Ebam, 2005). This is rather surprising because although there is a digital divide between the northern and southern hemispheres, the internet has opened countless possibilities for scholarly research in a variety of academic fields (Mutsvaro & Ragnedda, 2019; Nulens, 2001). There are pools of online primary and secondary resource materials that not only provide new impetus and tools for original

theological research in African Christianity generally, but could also expand the understanding of current developments and processes which have implications for the study of African theology. Through the current popularity of an assortment of online platforms, web-based applications, podcasts and portals, internet usage could lead to fresh discoveries that help in the recovery of altered perspectives, the rethinking of misunderstood religious identities and the provision of some clarity regarding the self-understanding of a variety of religious actors (Studstill & Cabrera, 2010, p.85).

A limited survey of theology students in French-speaking Central Africa and English-speaking East Africa suggests that students make limited use of the vast range of resources available on the internet and are often unable to find the most relevant resources. A team at the Protestant Theological University in Groningen (Netherlands) is currently developing a website called "African Theology Worldwide" (https://african.theologyworldwide.com/). This project intends to make the rich resources of African theology better accessible to both researchers in Africa and worldwide. Through this process we have ourselves been strengthened in our conviction regarding the importance of the internet for the study of African Christianity and theological developments across the continent. We have also been both impressed and bewildered by the richness and number of resources available. We want to share our discoveries in this article by answering the question: why use the internet in the study and research of African Theology?

This article introduces three areas through which the internet provides crucial resources for theological research: primary sources, secondary sources and archival repositories. Each of the three sections below locates this topic within the wider context in which the internet has become a central aspect of scholarly research for various academic fields. This will be followed by explanations of how the use of the internet could specifically aid students and researchers of theology in Africa. Finally, a few concrete examples will be provided to demonstrate how the use of the internet could unearth new resources for academic research around theological developments emerging from Africa.

Primary Resources

Present day use of the internet for theological research in Africa relates to the wider appeal of the internet among religious leaders and communities. There are growing numbers of religious actors both in Africa and among the African diaspora who have taken to the internet to disseminate a variety of religious products to their clientele (Hackett, 2009; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007; Bangura, 2018). As a faith that can be translated between various contexts, times and places, Christianity has easily found a place in online platforms. This phenomenon is not a new development, but rather builds on what first began when worship and religious services were initially broadcasted on radio and television. Religious leaders found that with the invention of the internet a new avenue had been created to serve the ever-growing needs of the faithful. The increasing globalization of African Christian communities in the diaspora has encouraged religious leaders to use the internet to reach out and minister to widespread pastoral needs. Apart from those wider developments, the occurrence of the COVID-19 global pandemic, and other epidemics such as the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) that rampaged West Africa between 2014 and 2016, have forced governments to implement restrictions that prohibit the public gathering of crowds of people. Additionally, some states restrict the activities of evangelists and the gathering of people into communities of worshippers for various political reasons. Under such circumstances, online broadcasts of religious services have become a way to circumvent any health restrictions and/or public order guidelines.

The major voices that have shaped recent developments within African Christianity (both those who share the intuitions of Pentecostalism and other more traditional

denominational beliefs) have increased their use of online streaming facilities to broadcast live worship services and other religious events on the internet (Hess, 2019). Religious clerics often maintain an online presence for several reasons, including, but not limited to, improving their public profile, connecting with youthful followers, promoting upcoming religious activities and marketing religious products (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007; Bangura, 2013, p.72-73). As they carry out such ministry-related activities, they leave an online trail of primary materials on the internet that can be used generally for academic research, and specifically for understanding the new ideas that have developed within African Christianity and Theology. Students and researchers will need to quickly learn how to determine which of those online trails of material found on outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels, podcasts and websites of religious communicators, can be considered useful primary resources in academic theological research. This online presence of African Christian leaders and communities is an important source for the study of African Christianity. One of the advantages of this development is that these sources are now globally available. We can now introduce students in Groningen (Netherlands) and in Durban (South Africa) to expressions of Christianity in Lagos (Nigeria). Although students need to be aware that this is just one expression of African Christianity, and that many faith communities in rural parts of the continent or in slums have no access to the internet, it is still an important and growing expression and one that is easily accessible.

We want to propose that these sources are not merely an expression of African Christianity as it can be studied by the social sciences. These expressions of African Christianity are themselves a rich source of theology, or rather, they are in themselves a form of theology. The local Christian community is itself a locus of theological reflection (Schreiter, 1985, p.16-18) and lived theology is itself a form of "faith seeking understanding" (Watkins, 2015, p.35). This corresponds with African traditions that locate wisdom not primarily in individuals, but in the community, in which individuals obviously still play a crucial role.

This does not mean that we should always identify the voice of lived experience with the voice of God. African Christian communities understand their lived faith to be an answer to the Scriptures and the leading of the Spirit. In their ongoing discourse about what it means to live out the Christian faith in particular contexts, they constantly refer to the Scriptures and seek to discern the leading of the Spirit. How we critically relate the way local Christian communities hear the voice of the Scriptures and the leading of the Spirit to historic Christianity and to biblical scholarship will raise further questions that lie beyond the scope of this article. The decisive point here is that it is not only academic scholars that produce theology. The lived theology of local communities is itself a theological voice that needs to be accounted for in theological conversations concerning the meaning of the Scriptures, the leading of the Spirit and the contextual relevance of the Gospel.

Let us consider an example; if a student wants to study African Christian practices of healing and deliverance and their implicit and explicit theological underpinnings, they will find a vast array of primary material on the internet. Consider the ministry of Pastor Francis A. M. Mambu, the general overseer and founder of Faith Healing Bible Church in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Researchers and students need not look any further than Pastor Mambu's Facebook page or YouTube channel for information. By accessing just these two online outlets, a researcher can piece together primary research materials that address how Pastor Mambu's teaching and beliefs about healing triangulate his understanding of the Bible, the appropriation of African culture and the current outbreak of diseases in the Sierra Leonean context. The fact that these materials are freely available online means that anyone could easily access them to ascertain the precise theology of healing and deliverance promoted by Pastor Francis Mambu. Furthermore, given that the resources are freely accessible online,

they could be easily accessed by other researchers in a bid to determine whether the analysis proffered by the researcher is fair and representative of the healing and deliverance practices adopted by Pastor Francis Mambu and his Faith Healing Bible Church.

Secondary Resources

The exponential growth of the internet in recent decades has also profoundly impacted the academy. In the academy today, there is a general move away from print and towards digital formats, with most institutions facing the pressure of adopting modes of disseminating research that support open access publishing. This online method of academic publishing makes it easier for scholars and institutions in Africa to publish research findings in ways that are globally and locally accessible.

A complicating factor is that many academic sources are not freely accessible. The power of Western academic institutions and of Western publishers allows them to lock some of the important search engines (such as the American Theological Library Association, ATLA) and publications behind paywalls that render them inaccessible to most African students and scholars. However, recently there have been several positive developments in this respect. Firstly, there is a significant push towards Open Access Publishing because a growing number of governments no longer consider it acceptable that the results of research carried out with public funds are not publicly accessible. Secondly, some providers of online platforms that distribute research have allowed their materials to be used in Africa either for lower fees (as in the case of ATLA) or upon registration for a free subscription (as in the case of GlobeTheoLib (https://www.globethics.net/web/gtl). The Open Access Digital Theological Library (https://oadtl.org/) and Sabinet African Archives (https://www.sabinet.co.za/) are good examples of the wide range of sources that are now freely available online.

To make the best use of these online secondary resources, researchers and students will constantly need to nurture three skills; the ability to: (1) find the growing number of sources on the Internet, (2) judge their academic quality and relevance and (3) be able to search through this vast amount of material effectively. It is our experience that students will often limit themselves to the most obvious search engines and platforms such as Google Books and Google Scholar. These platforms provide enormous amounts of material but are also limited by their bias towards Western and English-language materials. The huge number of hits these platforms provide also means that it is often harder to locate the most relevant materials. Therefore, students will need to be introduced to more specific catalogues and websites and will need to understand that the most relevant will often vary among subdisciplines. As part of our "African Theology Worldwide" website we are building a portal that provides links to some of the most helpful online resources and we encourage users to inform us about other websites they would like to add to this online platform. Judging the academic quality of online secondary sources is also a skill that needs to be honed. One major downside of the fact that it is so easy to publish online is that there is a great variance in the quality of the material available. Although several academic quality markers are widely recognized, such as the preference for refereed journals, the importance of such markers is not equally weighed across academic cultures. Yet, quality markers used by databases in the North-Atlantic world will normally reflect academic, cultural and possibly theological biases of this somewhat elitist environment. Therefore, it may be relatively hard for a theological journal created somewhere in tropical West or Central Africa to be listed on such Western platforms. Thus, students of theology in Africa will have to make their own quality judgements independently from international platforms. This is further complicated by the fact that the quality of individual articles in the same journal can vary greatly and more so in contexts where the supply of articles is not constant.

Let us consider an example; theology researchers and students in Africa may be required to critically evaluate the work of key figures in the field. Such a task might include a paper that analyses "the understanding of God in John S. Mbiti's theology," (see Hans Y.S. & Beyers, 2017) or a paper in which are to be found scholarly contestations of "the incarnational Christology of Kwame Bediako" (see Potgieter & Magezi, 2016). In these two examples, both the works of the authors themselves and the works of scholars commenting on the theologies of Mbiti and Bediako become helpful resources. Thus, the researcher's internet search must make proper use of the key words and/or phrases that have been placed in quotation marks above. In doing so, the student is sure to find the most desired online primary resources for their research (in this case the texts of the theologians themselves) and several secondary resources by others who have reflected on the contributions of Mbiti and Bediako. The search results will point to various resources that are publicly available online and that offer either free or paid-for access to their users. However, the student should not fall prey to simply selecting the first of the listed search results. He or she will need to go further and judge the quality and relevance of the different texts, both from Mbiti and Bediako themselves and from their commentators.

Repositories, Archival Resources and Collections

Archival collections are themselves a form of primary resources. However, in contrast to primary sources that are originally produced on the internet (discussed above), archives concern primary sources that were originally written down on paper (such as letters or minutes) or printed (such as books or magazines) and that have subsequently been made accessible through the internet. Similarly, the internet may provide a platform to make works of art more widely accessible than through museums and printed volumes.

For historiographers, access to rare historical documents such as original books, monographs, letters, sermon outlines, prayer and deliverance manuals, reports, maps or edicts, has become extremely restricted. This is because such archival documents are not only out of print but are also made of fragile materials and could fall into disrepair if they are not handled with caution. Consequently, there is need for such materials to be preserved if they are to be passed on to future generations of scholars. This means that they can only be accessed in limited locations, often in just a small number of specialized libraries in the case of rare books and only in one specialized archive in the case of items such as the archives of mission societies. Historically, libraries have invested heavily in acquiring repositories of rare books and archival materials to support the work of researchers. However, in major libraries around the world, a growing number of such materials are now being digitalized and stored in various online platforms and collections which provide its users with either restricted (subscription with membership fees) or free and open access to the collections and repositories. The digitalization of these rare collections has made such materials widely accessible to sections of the global population who would not ordinarily have the means to travel to places where these collections are kept (usually in the West). Now called digital humanities (Schreibman et al., 2018; Ridolfo, 2015; Rydberg-Cox, 2006), such materials make research in either the historical or literary disciplines far easier because researchers have unfettered access to the original thoughts, writing and works of key historical figures.

Although most archival resources tend to focus on people who are known to have a traditionally literate culture, the more varied media through which theological expressions occur across Africa are now also more easily disseminated online rather than in print format. The genre of African theological actors is diversely expressed through forms such as: prayers, songs and dances, translations of Scripture, biblical commentary and sermons, post-synodal apostolic exhortations, mother tongue catechisms and confessions of faith. In addition to

these forms, religious leaders can also share either written or oral systematic reflections on a given biblical issue, visions and dreams about the trajectories of their ministry, testimonies, prophetic or reformatory calls to change, liturgical practices, struggles for liberation or dignity, architecture, paintings and sculptures. Further expressions could include academic debates on the relationship between African Traditional Religion and Christianity or Islam. Each of these possibilities represent primary resources, which, with time, will become archival materials preserved either online or through some other appropriate outlets, repositories or collections for later use in the study of African Theology.

When researching a specific issue in the history of African Christianity, it is important to look for archival material on the internet. Yet, the amount of archival material that has been made available on the internet is still limited. Therefore, historical research may be triggered by new archival text becoming more widely available. Nevertheless, a researcher should explore the archival material that is available online when designing a research project. A first example of how to do this can be explored in a research project investigating the late 19th Century church and statesman Dr Edward Wilmot Blyden. An online search allows researchers to form new lines of inquiry into the historical processes in Sierra Leone and Liberia during his lifetime, and to ask how his Christian convictions embolden his struggle against slavery and his favourable view of Islam. To proceed with this research, one needs to look at online archival repositories that are making is his long out-of-print sermons, pamphlets and books, as in the continuously growing https://archive.org/ collection. From here it soon becomes clear that as a leading pan Africanist and churchman, Dr Blyden was not only concerned about the slave trade's inhumane impact on black populations across Africa and the world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but also believed that Africa's embrace of Christianity was crucial to what would become known as World Christianity.

A second example helps to explain how archival resources can contribute to a better understanding of missiologies shaping and shaped by the western mission enterprise. Sadly, the perspectives from European and North American missionaries and mission agencies have in general been much better preserved than those of their African collaborators, but with the help of critical forms of reading, one will be able to unearth local perspectives (e.g. Frederiks, 2010). An example of a collection be found in the Missionary Research Library Pamphlets at Princeton Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University (https://commons.ptsem.edu/mrl). Many of the reports, vision statements and policy documents collected here allow to closely study the development of perspectives on mission in the North Atlantic world in general or in particular mission agencies. They provide an picture of the past engagements of Western Christian missionary societies and actors across Africa. The online archival resources to be found from both searches allow us to study the views of leading African clerics like Blyden or missionary organizations that contributed to early developments in what we recognize today as African Theology. By accessing archival materials and resources from key actors in the formative years of African Christianity, one gets an impression some of the early concerns that shaped the discipline of African Theology.

Conclusion

The internet was developed in the West and many of its main platforms and search engines are biased towards Western sources. This has a significant impact on the criteria that are used to decide which voices will dominate these academic platforms. Such a situation demands a critical evaluation from an intercultural and postcolonial perspective to ascertain which voices are still excluded or marginalized. At the same time, 'Google willing', the internet is itself a democratizing force that allows African theologians to get their voices heard more easily either through online platforms such as academia.edu and researchgate.net or through regionally published online journals.

This paper looks at three different types of online sources for theological reflection to make the case that the internet could be used as an effective tool for researching theology and its related developments in Africa. Firstly, we pointed out that because many expressions of African Christianity can be found online, such materials now provide crucial primary resources for the study of theology across the continent. Secondly, we indicated that there are lots of secondary resources by African theologians and on African theological expressions that are available online and that are published by academic journals and other academic outlets. These resources critically reflect upon the issues that lie at the intersection of faith, culture and daily life realities at a grassroots level, and thus they offer diversified commentaries of the African response to God and the conditions of culture and history. Thirdly, we pointed out that as theology in Africa steadily moves online and becomes open access, archival repositories are gradually replacing physical libraries. These electronic and open access resources allow researchers to probe anew developments in the field. Therefore, the rapid pace at which the internet, web-based applications and mobile technologies have developed across Africa, has opened new avenues which hold high promise for theology students and researchers across Africa. In order to access the full potential of these developments, online research skills will need to be a regular part of courses on study and research methods in African seminaries and universities. Researchers and students are challenged to seek an understanding of the online resources they are using, to determine their credibility and how they may be properly interpreted, used and cited in academic research. Accessing online sources through the internet and web-based applications must be considered an exciting avenue of research that is poised to significantly enrich the study of theology in African contexts.

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