

# Critical-Liberative Theology: Towards an Understanding of Januarius Asongu's Theology

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## Abstract

This article offers a systematic and contextual theological interpretation of *Beyond Doctrine: A Critical-Liberative Theology of Faith and Emancipation* [1]. Combining close textual analysis with semi-structured interviews conducted with the author between 2022 and 2026, the study reconstructs Asongu's theological project as an integrated method uniting (i) liberation theology's praxis-oriented criterion of truth, (ii) Newmanian doctrinal development as a grammar of reform without rupture, (iii) conscience-centered moral reasoning as the interior forum of responsible discernment, and (iv) a critical epistemology grounded in Asongu's philosophical framework of Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR). The article argues that Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT) is best understood as a realist-liberationist method in which conscience mediates between doctrine's historical development and the Church's pastoral credibility, and that its canonical significance lies in a teleological construal of authority ordered to the *salus animarum* (c. 1752 CIC) and accountable to justice. The study situates CLT within debates on ecclesial authority, clericalism, institutional sin, and reform, emphasizing that Asongu's critique of the Church arises from ecclesial loyalty and sacramental commitment rather than hostility. Finally, the article shows how CLT expands liberation theology beyond classical socio-economic horizons to include ecological devastation, gender and sexuality, technological domination, migration, and epistemic liberation—illustrated concretely in Asongu's CSR-based argument that witchcraft is metaphysically incoherent and theologically unsound, and that superstition persists even among the educated as a form of epistemic captivity [2,3].

**Keywords:** Critical-Liberative Theology, Liberation Theology, Doctrinal Development, Canon Law, Conscience, Institutional Sin, Ecclesial Reform, Critical Synthetic Realism, African Catholic Theology. Epistemic Liberation, Witchcraft, Clericalism

## 1. Introduction: Theology between Fidelity and Crisis

Contemporary Christian theology unfolds amid a crisis that is simultaneously moral, institutional, and epistemic. Across continents, ecclesial communities confront the aftermath of clerical sexual abuse and cover-up, the corrosion of trust through financial opacity and political entanglements, widening inequality, ecological collapse, and the marginalization of women and sexual minorities. These failures are not reducible to administrative errors or public-relations disasters. They are theological in the strict sense: they expose contradictions between proclaimed doctrine and lived ecclesial practice, between sacramental claims and institutional behavior, between the Church's moral language and the structures through which its authority operates.

It is within this contested terrain that *Beyond Doctrine: A Critical-Liberative Theology of Faith and Emancipation* must be read. Januarius Jingwa Asongu writes neither as a detached critic nor as an adversary of the Church. He writes as an ecclesially formed Christian who has remained sacramentally and pastorally committed: a Fourth Degree Knight of Columbus, an Extraordinary Minister of the Holy Eucharist, and a long-time volunteer catechist. He has helped found and sustain African Catholic communities in the United States—especially in the Washington, DC metropolitan area and in Texas—responding to the spiritual and cultural dislocation experienced by African Catholics in diaspora. These commitments matter, not as biographical ornamentation, but as interpretive keys: they frame his critique as an *intra-ecclesial*

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argument about credibility, conscience, and reform rather than an external attack on doctrine.

The animating question of *Beyond Doctrine* is not whether the Church should abandon doctrine, but whether doctrine can remain morally intelligible without institutional conversion. Asongu's claim is stark: theology that refuses to interrogate its institutional effects—particularly where those effects are predictably humiliating, exclusionary, or violent—betrays the Gospel it seeks to proclaim. In other words, ecclesial credibility is not an optional pastoral bonus; it is a theological matter. This claim places Asongu in continuity with liberation theology's insistence that orthopraxy tests orthodoxy while also extending liberation theology's scope into the domains of doctrinal development, conscience, and the law-governed architecture of ecclesial authority [4,5].

### 1.1. The Argument of this Article

This article argues that Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT) is best understood as a realist-liberationist theological method structured by four interlocking commitments:

- i. CSR realism without absolutism:** truth is objective, but human access is partial, corrigible, and historically mediated [6,7].
- ii. Conscience as moral mediation:** conscience is not private subjectivism but the interior forum of responsible discernment that conditions authority's legitimacy [8,9].
- iii. Doctrinal development as a grammar of fidelity:** continuity is preserved by organic growth rather than doctrinal immobilism [7].
- iv. Liberation as a criterion of theological truth:** doctrine is evaluated by its fruits, especially its capacity to protect dignity and resist structural [4,5,10,11].

On this reading, CLT is not a political ideology grafted onto theology. It is a method for adjudicating the relationship between doctrinal claims and their lived consequences, with conscience functioning as the key mediator between tradition's historical articulation and concrete pastoral credibility.

### 1.2. Why this Matters for Canon Law and Ecclesial Reform

Because CLT concerns the credibility and moral purpose of authority, it bears directly on canon law. Canonical systems are not merely technical regulations; they instantiate theological assumptions about governance, rights, accountability, and communion. Asongu's critique of clericalism and institutional sin presses canonists to ask whether juridical structures have drifted from their teleological end: the *salus animarum* (c. 1752 CIC). CLT invites a renewed conversation between moral theology and canon law, especially around the rights and duties of the faithful, the internal and external fora, the legitimate exercise of governance, and the conditions under which obedience becomes morally incoherent.

### 1.3. Map of the Article

Section 2 clarifies how biography functions in CLT as a theological locus without collapsing into mere subjectivism. Section 3 examines Asongu's seminary disillusionment as the formative context of his critique of clerical culture and institutional self-protection. Section 4 summarizes Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR) as CLT's epistemological foundation. Section 5 presents the methodology: textual analysis supplemented by interviews, with explicit controls against authorial self-interpretation bias. Section 6 situates CLT within the wider landscape of liberation theology, African theology, and Catholic reformist traditions, identifying the specific gap CLT fills. Section 7 reconstructs CLT's doctrinal and moral architecture: development, conscience, authority, and credibility. Section 8 examines ecclesial power, clericalism, and institutional sin, including the abuse crisis as theological failure. Section 9 develops CLT's expanded horizon of liberation—economics, ecology, migration, gender/sexuality, technology, and epistemic liberation—culminating in Asongu's CSR-based critique of witchcraft and superstition [2,3]. Section 10 synthesizes the argument, addresses objections, and draws canonical implications.

### 2. Biography as Theological Locus: Context Without Reduction

Liberation theology has long insisted that theology is not produced in abstraction but emerges from concrete historical experience and returns to praxis [4,5]. CLT adopts this insight but seeks to discipline it: biography serves as context, not proof. In Asongu's project, lived experience does not replace doctrinal reasoning; it supplies the moral and pastoral questions that doctrinal reasoning must answer if it is to remain credible.

Asongu's theological imagination was shaped within deeply Catholic regions of Cameroon—the Nweh area of his birth and the Nso land of his upbringing—marked by dense sacramental life, devotional practice, and communal Catholic identity. His formation included daily Mass, Stations of the Cross, and sustained catechesis. He emerged as a leader in the Young Christian Students (YCS) movement, absorbing the See–Judge–Act methodology and the moral imagination of Catholic Social Teaching. This background matters because it produces a particular theological instinct: doctrine is not merely to be repeated; it must be judged by what it does in real communities.

Two features of this biographical locus deserve emphasis. First, Asongu's early exposure to poverty and inequality generated a durable moral dissonance: how can a Church proclaim good news while living comfortably alongside structural deprivation? Second, his later work in diaspora communities sharpened a related question: how can ecclesial structures claim catholicity while marginalizing the voices and needs of those formed outside Western centers of power? In CLT, biography functions as a lens that renders theological contradictions visible—without making personal experience the final court of appeal.

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### 3. Seminary Formation, Shock, and Critical Awakening

Asongu's entry into seminary intensified rather than resolved his theological questions. He describes not merely isolated moral failures but systemic contradictions within clerical culture: selective obedience, material privilege, institutional self-protection, and a disciplinary environment in which the appearance of holiness could override accountability. This disillusionment is crucial because it shapes CLT's central diagnosis: ecclesial crisis is not only the result of individual sin; it is also the product of structures that normalize unaccountability and punish critique.

As a seminarian, Asongu was widely regarded as a freethinker—not because he rejected faith, but because he refused to confine theology to inherited formulas detached from lived reality. During this period he engaged liberation theology African contextual critique conscience-centered moral theology doctrinal development and transcendental theology [4,5,7,9,12-14]. The resulting synthesis is visible in *Beyond Doctrine*: the conviction that fidelity is not passive repetition but responsible discernment under historical conditions.

Asongu ultimately left seminary not as a rejection of the Church but as a discerned refusal to participate in a clerical culture he judged insufficiently reformable from within. In CLT, this decision becomes paradigmatic: prophetic critique often requires a certain structural distance. Yet that distance is framed as ecclesial love rather than cynicism—an insistence that truth and dignity are the Church's own commitments, and therefore the Church must be accountable to them.

### 4. Critical Synthetic Realism as Epistemological Foundation

Asongu's theology is inseparable from Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR). CSR affirms the objectivity of truth while rejecting claims of exhaustive human possession of it. It draws on Popper's fallibilism and critique of closed systems Newman's historical account of how truth is articulated over time and the classical Christian confidence that reason is ordered toward truth [6,7,15]. CSR therefore provides CLT with a disciplined posture: **realism without authoritarianism**.

CSR does two things for CLT. First, it protects CLT from collapsing into relativism: liberation is not mere preference, but a moral criterion grounded in objective human dignity and the Gospel's claims. Second, it protects CLT from dogmatic closure: the Church's formulations remain historically mediated and thus accountable to critique, revision, and deeper understanding. This is why CSR is not an optional philosophical hobby within CLT—it is the epistemological engine enabling reform without rupture.

#### 4.1. CLT's Conceptual Architecture

To clarify CLT's internal logic, the method can be stated schematically:

CSR (critical realism & fallibilism) → Conscience (interior forum & moral mediation) → Doctrinal development (historical grammar of fidelity) → Liberation (criterion of fruits & dignity) → Ecclesial reform (institutional conversion & accountability)

This architecture will guide the analysis that follows. It shows how CLT is neither mere biography nor mere politics, but a coherent method for relating truth, authority, history, and liberation.

### 5. Methodology

#### 5.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive theological methodology combining systematic theology, contextual theology, ecclesiology, and juridical-theological reflection. The primary aim is reconstructive: to present CLT as a coherent theological method and to evaluate its significance for ecclesial credibility and canonical reasoning.

#### 5.2. Primary Textual Source

The normative textual object is Asongu's *Beyond Doctrine* treated as a systematic theological proposal [1]. The analysis prioritizes internal coherence, argumentative structure, and stated theological claims. Where the book advances evaluative judgments (e.g., on clericalism, conscience, authority), the article examines the conceptual warrants given: scriptural logic, doctrinal development, moral theology, and the epistemology supplied by CSR.

#### 5.3. Interviews: Scope, Function, and Controls

The study is informed by semi-structured interviews conducted with Asongu between 2022 and 2026. These interviews are used in a limited way: not as independent empirical proof, but as hermeneutical clarification of formative contexts, intended audience, and conceptual emphasis.

To limit "author self-interpretation" bias, three controls are applied:

- i. **Text-First Discipline:** claims about CLT are grounded primarily in *Beyond Doctrine*; interviews clarify rather than replace textual warrants.
- ii. **Thematic Coding:** interview content is organized under stable categories (authority, conscience, development, liberation, institutional sin, CSR), reducing the temptation to treat anecdote as argument.
- iii. **Triangulation:** where interview claims introduce new emphases (e.g., witchcraft as metaphysically impossible), the study cross-references Asongu's published CSR analyses on superstition and witchcraft [2,3].

#### 5.4. Ethical Disclosure

All interviews were conducted with informed consent. The author retains interpretive independence. The study is not an authorized biography and does not claim to represent Asongu's views beyond what is present in the cited texts and interview clarifications.

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## 5.5. Limitations and Future Research

The study focuses on *Beyond Doctrine* and selected CSR essays relevant to epistemic liberation and witchcraft critique [2,3]. It does not exhaust Asongu's wider corpus. Future research may examine CLT's implications for clerical formation, comparative Global South ecclesiologies, and more detailed canonical proposals regarding governance, accountability, and the rights of the faithful.

## 6. Positioning Critical-Liberative Theology: The Gap it Fills

CLT belongs to the liberationist family, but it cannot be reduced to classical Latin American liberation theology. Like Gutiérrez, it insists that theology arises from praxis and must be judged by its fruits in history [4]. Like Sobrino, it refuses a Christology or ecclesiology insulated from the suffering of the crucified peoples of history [5]. Yet CLT departs from some liberationist tendencies in two important ways: first, it explicitly anchors liberation within CSR's realist epistemology, resisting ideological closure; second, it integrates liberation with doctrinal development and conscience as internal ecclesial principles rather than external political correctives.

CLT also differs from major strands of African theology. While it resonates with Jean-Marc Ela's insistence that African theology must begin from lived suffering rather than imported abstraction CLT is less an inculturation project than a credibility project: it asks how ecclesial authority can claim moral legitimacy when institutional practices predictably injure dignity [13]. In that sense, it shares concerns with reformist Catholic theologians—Häring's conscience-centered moral theology Rahner's attention to experience as a locus of grace (Rahner, 1978), and Küng's critique of authority detached from truth but reconfigures these concerns within a liberationist criterion and CSR's epistemic discipline [9,16].

Finally, CLT is positioned uniquely at the intersection of theology and law. Many theological critiques of ecclesial power remain sociological or moral; CLT presses juridical questions: How does law serve truth? When does law become self-protective? How does conscience relate to governance? These questions are not optional add-ons. They are unavoidable if the Church's authority is to remain credible.

## 7. Foundations of Critical-Liberative Theology

### 7.1. Faith Seeking Emancipation: Reframing the Task of Theology

At the conceptual core of Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT) lies a deliberate reformulation of theology's classical purpose. The traditional definition, articulated most famously by Anselm as *fides quaerens intellectum*—faith seeking understanding—remains foundational [17]. Yet Asongu argues that this formulation, while necessary, is no longer sufficient under contemporary historical conditions marked by structural injustice, ecclesial scandal, and epistemic fragmentation. Theology must not only seek understanding; it must also seek emancipation.

This reframing does not subordinate theology to political activism, nor does it replace doctrinal truth with sociological outcomes. Rather, it restores a dimension already implicit within the Gospel itself: truth is known by its fruits (Matt. 7:16). Theology, therefore, cannot be evaluated solely on internal doctrinal coherence or formal fidelity to tradition. It must also be evaluated by its consequences in lived reality—specifically, whether it protects dignity, resists injustice, and promotes human flourishing.

This reformulation places CLT squarely within the liberationist lineage inaugurated by Gustavo Gutiérrez, who insisted that theology emerges from praxis and returns to praxis, tested in history [4]. Yet CLT extends this logic in a distinct direction. Liberation is not treated merely as a socio-economic category but as a comprehensive theological criterion encompassing institutional credibility, epistemic integrity, doctrinal development, and moral accountability.

The result is not a politicization of theology, but its moral re-grounding. Theology, in CLT, becomes accountable to the Gospel's own claims about truth, justice, and human dignity.

### 7.2. Critical Synthetic Realism and the Epistemology of Liberation

CLT's reformulation of theology depends upon its epistemological foundation: Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR). Without CSR, liberation risks collapsing into ideological subjectivism. With CSR, liberation is anchored in objective truth while remaining open to critique and development.

CSR affirms four core epistemological commitments:

- i. Ontological Realism:** Reality exists independently of human cognition. Truth is not constructed by consensus, power, or cultural preference.
- ii. Epistemic Fallibilism:** Human knowledge is partial, historically conditioned, and corrigible [6].
- iii. Critical Openness:** Claims about truth must remain open to scrutiny, revision, and deeper understanding.
- iv. Synthetic Integration:** Knowledge advances through dialogue, critique, and synthesis rather than dogmatic closure.

These commitments have direct theological consequences. If human knowledge is fallible, then theological formulations—even authoritative ones—must remain open to development. If truth is objective, then liberation cannot be reduced to subjective preference. If knowledge advances through critique, then questioning ecclesial structures is not rebellion but fidelity.

CSR thus protects CLT from two opposite dangers:

- **Relativism**, in which liberation becomes mere ideological preference.
- **Authoritarianism**, in which doctrine becomes immune to moral scrutiny.

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By affirming realism without absolutism, CSR provides CLT with an epistemological framework capable of sustaining both fidelity and reform.

### 7.3. Liberation as a Criterion of Theological Truth

One of CLT's most distinctive contributions is its insistence that liberation functions as a criterion of theological truth. This claim must be carefully understood. CLT does not argue that liberation replaces Scripture, tradition, or doctrinal reasoning. Rather, liberation serves as a test of their credibility.

This criterion emerges directly from the Gospel's moral logic. Jesus consistently evaluates religious authority not by institutional status but by moral fruit: healing the sick, restoring dignity, confronting oppression, and protecting the vulnerable. Theology that produces fear, exclusion, or humiliation contradicts the Gospel's liberative trajectory.

Liberation, in CLT, operates across multiple dimensions:

- Liberation from economic exploitation
- Liberation from political oppression
- Liberation from ecclesial abuse and clericalism
- Liberation from gender and sexual marginalization
- Liberation from ecological destruction
- Liberation from epistemic captivity and superstition

This last category—epistemic liberation—will later prove especially significant in CLT's critique of witchcraft belief systems [2,3]. Theology must liberate not only bodies and institutions, but minds and explanatory frameworks.

This liberation criterion does not relativize doctrine. It operationalizes doctrine's own moral purpose. Doctrine exists not for its own preservation, but for the salvation and flourishing of persons.

### 7.4. Historical Consciousness and Doctrinal Development

CLT's liberation criterion depends upon a historically conscious understanding of doctrine. Here Asongu draws heavily upon John Henry Newman's theory of doctrinal development. Newman argued that doctrine is not a static deposit but a living tradition that grows organically over time [7]. Continuity is preserved not by repetition, but by faithful development. This insight provides CLT with its theological grammar for reform. Development is not rupture. It is fidelity under historical conditions.

CLT applies this principle to situations where doctrinal formulations or disciplinary practices produce persistent moral harm. In such cases, historical consciousness demands reevaluation. Fidelity lies not in defending harmful outcomes, but in recovering doctrine's underlying theological purpose.

This approach avoids two extremes:

- **Doctrinal Immobilism**, which treats formulations as timeless

and immune to development.

- **Doctrinal Relativism**, which treats doctrine as infinitely malleable.

Instead, CLT affirms development as disciplined fidelity—guided by Scripture, tradition, reason, conscience, and liberation as moral criterion.

### 7.5. Conscience as the Interior Forum of Theological Discernment

At the center of CLT's moral architecture lies conscience. Drawing explicitly on Newman's description of conscience as the "aboriginal Vicar of Christ" CLT affirms conscience as the interior forum where believers encounter moral truth and assume responsibility for their response [8].

This claim has profound theological and canonical implications.

Conscience performs three essential functions:

- i. Moral Discernment: Conscience mediates between doctrine and lived reality.
- ii. Moral Accountability: Individuals remain responsible for their actions, even within hierarchical structures.
- iii. Moral Resistance: When authority demands participation in injustice, conscience authorizes refusal.

This third function is especially significant. CLT rejects theological models in which obedience is treated as inherently virtuous regardless of moral consequence. Obedience detached from conscience becomes complicity.

This position aligns with the Church's own canonical tradition. Canon law recognizes the internal forum as a domain of moral discernment distinct from external juridical authority. The legitimacy of authority depends, in part, upon its orientation toward truth and justice.

CLT therefore reframes conscience not as a threat to ecclesial unity, but as its moral safeguard.

### 7.6. Authority, Credibility, and the Moral Limits of Power

CLT does not reject authority. It interrogates its moral legitimacy. Authority exists to serve truth, protect dignity, and foster communion. When authority becomes self-protective—prioritizing institutional reputation over justice—it undermines its own theological foundation.

This critique is especially relevant in light of the clerical sexual abuse crisis. CLT interprets the crisis not merely as moral failure, but as theological failure. The misuse of authority to silence victims, suppress accountability, and protect institutional reputation represents a distortion of authority's purpose.

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Authority loses credibility when it ceases to serve truth. This principle aligns with canon law's teleological structure. The supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls (*salus animarum*, c. 1752 CIC). Authority detached from this purpose becomes theologically incoherent.

CLT thus calls for a renewed integration of authority, conscience, and liberation. Authority is strengthened—not weakened—when it remains accountable to truth and justice.

### 7.7. Scope Conditions: What Critical-Liberative Theology Does Not Claim

To prevent misunderstanding, it is important to clarify what CLT does not claim.

CLT does not:

- Reject doctrine or tradition.
- Deny spiritual reality.
- Advocate ecclesial anarchy.
- Reduce theology to political ideology.
- Claim that liberation replaces theological truth.

Rather, CLT insists that doctrine, authority, and tradition must remain accountable to their own theological purpose: the salvation, dignity, and flourishing of human persons.

CLT is therefore best understood not as a rejection of the Church, but as an argument for its moral and theological renewal.

## 8. Doctrine, Development, Authority, and the Canonical Architecture of Credibility

### 8.1. Doctrine as Living Tradition, Not Frozen Deposit

A central concern of Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT) is what Asongu identifies as doctrinal immobilism: the treatment of doctrinal formulations as timeless artifacts immune to development, critique, or historical reinterpretation. CLT does not reject doctrine. On the contrary, it affirms doctrine as indispensable to ecclesial identity, continuity, and coherence. Doctrine preserves memory, articulates faith, and safeguards theological truth. Yet CLT insists that doctrine must be understood as a living tradition rather than a frozen deposit.

This distinction is rooted in John Henry Newman's theory of doctrinal development. Newman observed that doctrine unfolds historically, responding to new intellectual, moral, and pastoral challenges [7]. Genuine development preserves continuity while allowing for growth. It is neither rigid repetition nor arbitrary innovation, but organic maturation.

CLT extends Newman's insight by emphasizing doctrine's moral dimension. Development is not merely conceptual but ethical. When doctrinal formulations or disciplinary norms produce persistent harm—particularly toward identifiable groups such as abuse victims, women, sexual minorities, or marginalized

communities—development becomes not only permissible but necessary. Fidelity to tradition requires moral responsiveness.

This position reflects a deeper theological logic: doctrine exists to serve salvation. It is a means, not an end. When doctrinal formulations become instruments of humiliation, exclusion, or injustice, they contradict their own theological purpose.

CLT therefore reframes doctrinal fidelity as dynamic rather than static. Fidelity consists not in preserving formulations unchanged, but in preserving their underlying theological intent under changing historical conditions.

### 8.2. Authority as Theologically Conditioned, Not Self-Justifying

The question of doctrinal development inevitably raises the question of authority. Who has the right to interpret doctrine? Under what conditions does authority retain credibility? And what happens when authority itself becomes implicated in injustice?

CLT's answer begins with a theological principle: authority is not self-justifying. Authority derives its legitimacy from its service to truth, dignity, and communion. When authority fulfills this purpose, it functions as a vehicle of grace. When it becomes self-protective, suppressing critique to preserve institutional stability, it undermines its own theological foundation.

This critique does not reject ecclesial authority. It rejects distorted authority.

Authority, in CLT, is teleological. Its legitimacy depends upon its orientation toward the *salus animarum*. This principle, enshrined in canon law as the supreme law of the Church (c. 1752 CIC), provides a juridical and theological benchmark for evaluating governance.

Authority that protects abuse rather than victims, suppresses conscience rather than forming it, or prioritizes reputation over truth ceases to fulfill its theological function.

CLT therefore reframes critique of authority as an expression of fidelity rather than rebellion.

### 8.3. Conscience and the Internal Forum: Canonical and Theological Implications

CLT's emphasis on conscience has profound canonical implications. The Catholic tradition distinguishes between the external forum (public juridical authority) and the internal forum (conscience and sacramental discernment). This distinction reflects a theological recognition that moral responsibility cannot be fully externalized.

Conscience occupies a privileged position in this architecture. It is not mere subjective preference. It is the locus of moral encounter between the person and truth.

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Newman’s description of conscience as the “aboriginal Vicar of Christ” captures this theological weight [8]. Conscience mediates divine authority at the level of personal moral responsibility.

CLT builds upon this tradition by insisting that conscience is not subordinate to authority in a simplistic hierarchical sense. Rather, conscience and authority exist in reciprocal relationship. Authority forms conscience, but conscience also evaluates authority.

This reciprocal relationship has clear canonical implications. The rights and duties of the faithful include the right to express concerns about matters affecting the good of the Church (cf. Book II, CIC). Authority must remain responsive to the *sensus fidelium*.

CLT therefore affirms that conscience-centered critique can function as an instrument of ecclesial fidelity.

**8.4. Governance, Accountability, and the Rights of the Faithful**  
Canon law recognizes that authority must operate within juridical limits. Governance is not arbitrary. It is ordered toward communion and justice.

CLT presses this canonical logic further by asking whether existing governance structures adequately protect accountability. The clerical sexual abuse crisis revealed systemic failures not only of individual morality but of institutional governance. Structures designed to preserve order were used to suppress truth.

CLT interprets this as a theological problem. Governance structures became detached from their teleological purpose.

The rights of the faithful include protection from harm, access to justice, and participation in ecclesial life. When governance structures fail to protect these rights, they undermine ecclesial credibility.

CLT therefore calls for governance reforms consistent with canon law’s theological purpose. Authority must remain accountable to truth, justice, and the dignity of persons.

### 8.5. Clericalism as Structural Distortion

CLT identifies clericalism as one of the most significant structural distortions affecting ecclesial credibility. Clericalism is not merely the existence of clergy. It is a cultural system in which clerical status becomes insulated from accountability.

This insulation produces predictable consequences:

- Moral failures are concealed rather than addressed.
- Critique is interpreted as disloyalty.
- Authority becomes self-protective rather than truth-oriented.

CLT interprets clericalism not simply as sociological dysfunction but as theological distortion. It represents a corruption of authority’s purpose.

Pope Francis has repeatedly identified clericalism as a root cause of ecclesial crisis. CLT provides the epistemological and theological framework explaining why clericalism produces structural harm.

Authority detached from accountability ceases to serve truth.

### 8.6. Institutional Sin and Structural Responsibility

Traditional moral theology has focused primarily on individual sin. CLT expands the moral horizon to include institutional sin—patterns of injustice embedded within structures and systems.

Institutional sin operates through normalization. Harmful practices become routine, invisible, and self-reinforcing.

Examples include:

- Systematic concealment of abuse
- Exclusion of marginalized groups
- Protection of institutional reputation over truth
- Suppression of dissent

CLT argues that institutional sin requires structural repentance. Individual repentance alone is insufficient.

This insight aligns with liberation theology’s emphasis on structural injustice [4]. CLT extends this analysis into ecclesiology and canon law.

### 8.7. Objections and Replies

#### Objection 1: Liberation as Criterion Leads to Relativism.

**Reply:** CLT grounds liberation in objective human dignity and Gospel truth, not subjective preference. Liberation functions as a moral criterion, not an epistemological replacement for truth.

#### Objection 2: Conscience-Centered Theology Undermines Authority.

**Reply:** CLT affirms reciprocal accountability. Authority forms conscience, but conscience safeguards authority’s moral credibility.

#### Objection 3: Doctrinal Development Risks Doctrinal Rupture.

**Reply:** CLT follows Newman’s model of organic continuity. Development preserves identity while allowing maturation.

#### Objection 4: Institutional Sin Language Politicizes Theology.

**Reply:** Institutional sin describes moral realities already recognized in Scripture and tradition. It restores theology’s capacity to address structural injustice.

This canonical and doctrinal architecture prepares the way for CLT’s ecclesiological critique of power, abuse, and institutional credibility.

## 9. Church, Power, and Institutional Sin: Toward an Ecclesiology of Credibility

### 9.1. The Church as Sacrament and Historical Institution

Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT) begins its ecclesiological

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analysis with a foundational distinction: the Church exists simultaneously as sacrament and as historical institution. This distinction, articulated most clearly in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, affirms that the Church is both a visible social organism and a vehicle of divine grace [18]. The Church mediates transcendence through historical forms—hierarchy, doctrine, law, and institutional governance.

CLT insists that theological integrity requires holding these two dimensions together. When the Church's sacramental identity is emphasized at the expense of its historical embeddedness, ecclesiology becomes idealized and resistant to critique. The Church is treated as immune from moral failure. Conversely, when the Church is reduced to a purely sociological institution, its theological vocation is obscured.

CLT rejects both extremes. The Church is neither morally immune nor merely human. It is holy in vocation yet fallible in history.

This paradox creates a theological imperative: precisely because the Church claims divine authority, it must remain accountable to justice, truth, and transparency. Sacramental identity does not excuse institutional failure. It intensifies responsibility.

## 9.2. Power as an Epistemological and Theological Problem

CLT advances a crucial insight: power is not merely administrative; it is epistemological. Power determines not only who governs but whose interpretations of reality are recognized as legitimate.

In ecclesial contexts, power shapes:

- Which theological interpretations are considered orthodox
- Which voices are amplified or marginalized
- How misconduct is interpreted or concealed
- How doctrine is applied in practice

Leonardo Boff identified this dynamic in his critique of ecclesial structures that prioritize institutional preservation over prophetic truth [12]. CLT extends this analysis by integrating it with CSR's epistemology.

Those who control institutional power often control theological discourse. This creates the risk of epistemic closure, where critique is dismissed not because it is false but because it threatens institutional stability.

CSR identifies this as a classic feature of closed epistemic systems: structures designed to preserve themselves become resistant to truth.

CLT therefore treats ecclesial power as a theological category subject to moral evaluation.

Power must remain accountable to truth.

## 9.3. Clericalism and the Structure of Immunity

CLT identifies clericalism as a primary mechanism through which ecclesial power becomes distorted. Clericalism is not simply respect for clergy. It is a cultural and structural system that grants clergy implicit moral immunity.

This immunity manifests in several ways:

- Clergy are presumed morally trustworthy even when evidence suggests otherwise.
- Critique of clergy is treated as disloyalty rather than legitimate accountability.
- Institutional mechanisms prioritize protection of clerical reputation.

This dynamic played a central role in the clerical sexual abuse crisis. Abuse persisted not merely because of individual moral failure, but because institutional structures discouraged accountability.

CLT interprets clericalism as theological distortion. Authority exists to serve truth and protect dignity. When authority becomes insulated from critique, it ceases to fulfill its theological function. Pope Francis has repeatedly identified clericalism as a root cause of ecclesial dysfunction. CLT provides the epistemological framework explaining why clericalism produces systemic injustice. Clericalism transforms authority into immunity.

## 9.4. The Sexual Abuse Crisis as Theological Failure

CLT interprets the clerical sexual abuse crisis not merely as institutional scandal but as theological failure. The crisis exposed structural contradictions between ecclesial claims and institutional behavior.

Several theological distortions became evident:

- Authority was treated as inherently trustworthy rather than accountable.
- Institutional reputation was prioritized over victim protection.
- Obedience was used to suppress moral dissent.
- Secrecy was justified as necessary for ecclesial stability.

These practices contradicted the Gospel's moral logic. The protection of the vulnerable is central to Christian ethics.

CLT argues that the abuse crisis represents a collapse of authority's moral credibility. Theological language was used to protect institutional power rather than truth. This represents institutional sin in its most acute form: institutional sin differs from individual sin in its structural character. It operates through policies, norms, and cultural expectations rather than isolated actions.

CLT therefore insists that institutional repentance must accompany individual repentance.

Structural injustice requires structural reform.

## 9.5. Authority and the Crisis of Credibility

Authority depends upon credibility. Credibility emerges from

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moral coherence between proclamation and practice.

CLT argues that ecclesial authority has suffered credibility erosion because institutional behavior has contradicted theological claims.

Authority that suppresses truth undermines its own legitimacy. This insight aligns with CSR's epistemology. Closed systems resist correction and therefore lose credibility. Open systems remain capable of truth.

CLT therefore frames ecclesial reform not as optional adaptation but as theological necessity.

Authority must remain accountable to truth.

### 9.6. Institutional Sin and Structural Repentance

CLT expands traditional moral theology by emphasizing institutional sin. Institutional sin refers to injustice embedded within structures rather than isolated actions.

Examples include:

- Concealment of abuse
- Systematic exclusion of marginalized persons
- Suppression of theological critique
- Protection of institutional reputation over justice

Institutional sin persists because it becomes normalized.

CLT argues that institutional repentance must address structural conditions.

Repentance requires:

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Reform of governance structures
- Protection of vulnerable persons

This aligns with liberation theology's structural analysis of injustice while extending it into ecclesiology.

### 9.7. Ecclesial Reform as Theological Imperative

CLT frames ecclesial reform as theological necessity rather than sociological adaptation.

Reform strengthens authority by restoring credibility.

This reform involves:

- Reintegration of conscience into ecclesial decision-making
- Structural accountability mechanisms
- Greater participation of the faithful
- Alignment of governance with theological purpose

CLT emphasizes that reform arises from ecclesial fidelity, not rebellion. Reform restores theological coherence.

### 9.8. The Church as Both Subject and Object of Liberation

Liberation theology traditionally focuses on liberation of the oppressed within society. CLT extends liberation theology inward.

The Church itself requires liberation—from clericalism, structural injustice, and epistemic closure.

This claim may appear paradoxical. Yet it reflects a fundamental theological insight: institutions can become captive to their own structures.

Liberation restores institutions to their original purpose. CLT therefore interprets ecclesial reform as an act of fidelity rather than rejection. Liberation strengthens ecclesial identity. This ecclesiological framework prepares the way for CLT's expanded account of liberation, including economic justice, ecological responsibility, gender and sexual inclusion, migration, technological domination, and epistemic liberation.

### 10. Liberation, Justice, and Epistemic Emancipation

#### 10.1. Liberation as the Hermeneutical Horizon of Theology

Within Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT), liberation is not merely one theological theme among many. It is the hermeneutical horizon through which all theological claims must be interpreted and evaluated. This claim builds directly upon the liberationist insight that theology emerges from lived reality and must return to transform that reality [4,5]. Yet CLT expands liberation's scope beyond socio-economic injustice to include institutional credibility, epistemic integrity, ecological responsibility, and anthropological dignity.

Liberation, in CLT, is fundamentally concerned with restoring the integrity of the human person as created in the image of God. The *imago Dei* is not an abstract theological concept but a moral claim: every human person possesses irreducible dignity that no institution, doctrine, or cultural system may legitimately violate. Theology that legitimizes humiliation, exclusion, or structural harm contradicts its own theological foundation.

This liberation-centered hermeneutic reorients theological inquiry. Instead of asking only whether doctrinal formulations are internally coherent, CLT asks whether they remain morally intelligible in their consequences. Theology must remain accountable to the lived realities of those it affects.

This approach aligns with Jesus' own theological practice. His ministry consistently prioritized liberation—healing the sick, restoring the marginalized, confronting unjust authority, and challenging systems that burdened rather than liberated persons.

Liberation, therefore, is not external to Christian theology. It is intrinsic to it.

#### 10.2. The Preferential Option for the Poor as Epistemological Principle

CLT adopts and extends the liberationist principle of the

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preferential option for the poor. Traditionally, this principle has been understood as a moral commitment to protect vulnerable populations. CLT deepens this insight by treating it also as an epistemological principle.

The poor occupy a privileged epistemic position because structural injustice exposes realities often invisible to those benefiting from existing systems. The experience of marginalization reveals structural contradictions that institutional power tends to obscure.

Asongu's early encounters with poverty in Cameroon profoundly shaped this epistemological awareness. Poverty revealed not merely economic deprivation but structural injustice embedded within social, political, and ecclesial systems.

CLT therefore insists that theological reflection must remain accountable to those most affected by injustice. Theology detached from lived reality risks becoming abstract ideology.

This insight aligns with Jean-Marc Ela's critique of African theology that reproduces European abstractions while ignoring lived suffering [13]. CLT integrates this insight into a broader epistemological framework grounded in CSR.

Truth emerges most clearly where suffering exposes structural contradictions.

### **10.3. Economic Justice and Structural Liberation**

CLT identifies economic injustice as a central theological concern. Poverty is not merely unfortunate; it is frequently the product of structural sin.

Economic systems that produce extreme inequality violate the theological principle of human dignity. CLT does not prescribe specific economic models but insists that economic systems must be evaluated by their consequences.

Pope Francis articulated this critique powerfully in *Evangelii Gaudium*, warning against economic systems that exclude rather than include [10].

CLT integrates economic justice into its broader liberation framework. Liberation includes restoring economic conditions consistent with human dignity. Economic injustice is not merely a political issue. It is a theological issue.

### **10.4. Gender, Sexuality, and Anthropological Dignity**

CLT extends liberation theology's scope to include gender and sexuality. Asongu argues that theological anthropology must remain accountable to lived human experience.

Doctrinal formulations concerning gender and sexuality must be evaluated by their effects on human dignity. Practices that produce shame, exclusion, or psychological harm require theological

reevaluation.

CLT affirms that dignity derives from personhood rather than institutional classification.

This position builds upon personalist moral theology and Rahner's emphasis on human experience as a locus of theological reflection [9,14].

CLT does not reject tradition. It insists that tradition must remain morally intelligible.

### **10.5. Ecological Liberation and the Integrity of Creation**

CLT expands liberation theology beyond anthropocentric concerns to include ecological liberation. Environmental destruction represents a form of structural sin.

Creation itself suffers under exploitative economic and technological systems. Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* articulated the theological significance of ecological responsibility [11]. CLT integrates ecological liberation into its broader theological framework. Liberation includes restoring harmony between humanity and creation. Ecological responsibility is theological responsibility.

### **10.6. Migration, Displacement, and Ecclesial Responsibility**

Migration represents one of the defining realities of the contemporary world. CLT interprets migration not as anomaly but as theological locus. Migrants embody structural inequality, political violence, and economic injustice.

Asongu's pastoral work among African diaspora communities exposed these realities directly. CLT interprets migration through liberationist and ecclesiological lenses. The Church itself is a pilgrim community. Theological fidelity requires solidarity with migrants.

### **10.7. Epistemic Liberation and the Critique of Superstition**

One of CLT's most distinctive contributions is its emphasis on epistemic liberation. Liberation includes freeing human consciousness from explanatory systems that undermine rational accountability and theological coherence.

Asongu's philosophical framework of Critical Synthetic Realism provides the epistemological foundation for this critique. CSR affirms that reality is intelligible and governed by coherent causal structures. Explanatory systems that violate causal intelligibility undermine both rational and theological integrity. This insight becomes especially significant in CLT's critique of witchcraft belief systems.

### **10.8. Witchcraft and the Liberation of Theology from Epistemic and Theological Error**

A distinctive and philosophically rigorous dimension of CLT is Asongu's argument that witchcraft—understood as the capacity of

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human agents to exercise hidden supernatural causal power over others—is philosophically impossible and theologically unsound [2,3].

CSR affirms that causation requires intelligible mediation. Effects arise from identifiable causal processes. Witchcraft claims posit causal influence without causal mediation. Such claims violate the necessary conditions of causal intelligibility.

Asongu’s empirical research further demonstrates that belief in witchcraft persists even among highly educated individuals [2]. This persistence reveals that superstition can coexist with formal education. Superstition reflects epistemic conditioning rather than rational justification. Theologically, witchcraft belief undermines divine sovereignty. Christianity affirms that God alone possesses ultimate causal authority over creation.

Attributing hidden supernatural power to human agents distorts theological coherence. CLT therefore frames rejection of witchcraft belief as theological necessity. Liberation includes epistemic liberation. Theology must liberate human consciousness from fear-based explanatory systems.

### 10.9. Liberation as Constructive Hope

Despite its critique, CLT remains fundamentally hopeful. Liberation is not merely critique but constructive transformation.

CLT envisions a Church capable of self-correction, transparency, and renewed credibility. Liberation strengthens ecclesial fidelity.

## 11. Conclusion: Theological Synthesis, Canonical Implications, and the Future of Ecclesial Credibility

### 11.1. Critical-Liberative Theology as a Coherent Theological Method

This study has argued that Critical-Liberative Theology (CLT), as articulated in Januarius Asongu’s *Beyond Doctrine*, constitutes a coherent theological method rather than a polemical critique or ideological program. CLT integrates four elements that have historically existed in partial or fragmented form within Catholic theological tradition but are here synthesized into a unified methodological framework:

- i. Critical Synthetic Realism (CSR)** as an epistemological foundation grounding theology in objective truth while affirming human fallibility and the necessity of critique;
- ii. Conscience-centered moral reasoning** as the interior forum mediating doctrinal claims and lived moral responsibility;
- iii. Doctrinal development**, following Newman’s organic model, as the grammar through which tradition remains historically faithful;
- iv. Liberation as a theological criterion**, ensuring that doctrine remains accountable to human dignity and the Gospel’s moral trajectory.

This synthesis produces a theological method capable of addressing contemporary ecclesial crises without dissolving theological identity. CLT neither rejects doctrine nor abandons tradition. It restores their credibility by reuniting doctrinal formulation with moral consequence.

CLT thus represents not theological rupture, but theological maturation.

### 11.2. The Canonical Significance of Critical-Liberative Theology

CLT carries profound implications for canon law. Canon law is not merely a regulatory system; it is the juridical embodiment of ecclesial theology. Law expresses theological assumptions about authority, governance, conscience, and communion.

CLT invites canon law to recover its teleological orientation toward the *salus animarum*. Authority exists not for institutional preservation but for the salvation and flourishing of persons.

This principle has several canonical implications:

**First**, authority must remain accountable to moral truth. Governance structures cannot legitimately prioritize institutional reputation over justice.

Second, the rights and duties of the faithful must be understood as theological realities rather than procedural formalities. The faithful possess the right—and sometimes the duty—to express concerns affecting ecclesial well-being.

**Third**, conscience must remain protected as the internal forum of moral responsibility. Authority cannot legitimately compel participation in injustice.

**Fourth**, governance structures must remain open to reform when structural conditions undermine theological credibility.

CLT therefore strengthens canon law by restoring its theological foundation.

Law must serve truth.

### 11.3. Authority, Credibility, and the Restoration of Trust

Authority depends upon credibility. Credibility emerges from coherence between theological claims and institutional practice.

CLT identifies credibility erosion as one of the Church’s most serious contemporary challenges. The clerical sexual abuse crisis revealed structural failures that undermined trust. Authority that suppresses truth loses moral legitimacy.

CLT does not weaken authority. It strengthens authority by restoring accountability. Authority becomes credible when it serves truth rather than institutional self-protection. This principle aligns with both theological tradition and canonical purpose.

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#### 11.4. Liberation Expanded: Institutional, Anthropological, and Epistemic

CLT expands liberation theology beyond its classical socio-economic focus. Liberation encompasses multiple dimensions:

- Liberation from structural injustice
- Liberation from clericalism and institutional sin
- Liberation from anthropological marginalization
- Liberation from ecological destruction
- Liberation from epistemic captivity

The inclusion of epistemic liberation represents one of CLT's most distinctive contributions. Asongu's CSR-based critique of witchcraft belief demonstrates how superstition can undermine both rational and theological integrity [2,3]. Liberation includes liberation of thought.

Theology must remain accountable to intelligible reality.

#### 11.5. Objections Revisited and Theological Clarification

Several objections to CLT merit final consideration.

**Objection:** CLT subordinates doctrine to sociological concerns.

**Reply:** CLT restores doctrine's theological purpose by ensuring its alignment with human dignity and Gospel truth.

**Objection:** CLT undermines ecclesial authority.

**Reply:** CLT strengthens authority by grounding its legitimacy in truth and moral accountability.

**Objection:** CLT introduces subjectivism through conscience-centered reasoning.

**Reply:** CLT affirms conscience as a theological locus rooted in tradition, not arbitrary preference.

**Objection:** CLT represents ideological theology.

**Reply:** CLT is grounded in CSR realism, doctrinal development, and theological tradition.

These objections misunderstand CLT's methodological architecture.

CLT seeks theological fidelity, not ideological innovation.

#### 11.6. The Church as Subject and Object of Liberation

Liberation theology traditionally focuses on liberating oppressed persons within society. CLT extends liberation inward.

The Church itself requires liberation—from clericalism, structural injustice, epistemic closure, and institutional self-protection. This claim is not anti-ecclesial. It reflects theological realism. Institutions can become captive to their own structures. Liberation restores institutions to their theological purpose. CLT therefore interprets ecclesial reform as an act of fidelity. Reform strengthens ecclesial identity.

#### 11.7. The Future of Critical-Liberative Theology

CLT represents an emerging theological paradigm with significant implications for systematic theology, ecclesiology, moral theology, and canon law.

Its strengths include:

- Epistemological rigor grounded in CSR
- Integration of liberation theology with doctrinal development
- Canonically informed analysis of authority and governance
- Attention to epistemic liberation and superstition
- Commitment to ecclesial fidelity rather than external critique

CLT offers a theological method capable of addressing contemporary ecclesial crises without abandoning theological identity.

It provides a framework for theological renewal rooted in truth, conscience, and liberation.

#### 11.8. Final Theological Judgment

This article advances a clear evaluative conclusion:

Critical-Liberative Theology constitutes a theologically serious, philosophically grounded, canonically relevant, and pastorally necessary contribution to contemporary Christian thought.

- It does not call the Church to abandon doctrine, but to recover its moral intelligibility.
- It does not weaken authority, but restores its credibility.
- It does not dilute theological truth, but defends its integrity.
- In an era marked by institutional crisis, epistemic fragmentation, and moral disillusionment, CLT offers a path forward.

It reminds theology of its deepest purpose:

To speak truth in service of liberation, dignity, and human flourishing.

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