

The Odyssey of African Theologians in America

By

Marinus C. Iwuchukwu, Ph.D.

Introduction

Theologians of African descent are among the growing pool of foreign scholars who are adopting the United States as their temporary or permanent home. Primarily, they are either working within academia or holding pastoral responsibilities. Typically, many of these African Christian theologians are products of western education and/or the Western cultural mindset. This is true regardless of which geographical contexts they received their training. This article is designed to take a closer look at the challenges African theologians in the United States must confront as well as the opportunities that await them. One of the goals of this article is to raise awareness about the constraints and difficulties theologians of African extraction are facing as well as the opportunities working in the United States offer. Another goal is to energize the base of both those who are interested in and support-the growth of African theologians and theological issues and those African theologians who have opted to live and work in the United States.

The evangelization of 19th and 20th century Africa was fundamentally wrapped around European colonial worldviews and assumptions, namely making Christianity synonymous with Western culture and demonizing native African cultural practices and beliefs as anti-Christian. Therefore, many African theologians have been trained to think Western, but live African (when living African implies taking the back seat all the time or remaining voiceless and inept on matters where they are victims of Western prejudice or social injustice). Roger Haight, in his article “Lessons From An Extraordinary Era: Catholic Theology Since Vatican II,”¹ albeit with the best of intentions, perpetuates the stereotypical theological assumption that popularly defines and identifies both African theology and African theologians with only inculturation theology; a post-colonial worldview, which holds that what are authentically African in theology have to be matters relating to incorporating African culture and ideologies into Christian theology. Such a stereotypical theological assumption has been contingent on the popular theory, especially in the West, that authentic Christianity or genuine Christian theology *must be* centered on the thoughts of Western theologians or Western cultural ideology. In the light of this theological

phenomenon, a critical question each of us, as African theologians or people interested in promoting African theology need to ask ourselves is, when will the African worldview contribute to the mainstream of Christian theology?

Many African-born theologians, both in their home countries and overseas, tend to buttress the stereotype of under-developed African theology by consciously or unconsciously viewing African theology as either not mature enough to tackle global issues and/or culturally incapable of engaging in more traditional theological issues. As a theologian of African descent I find it frustrating to be dismissed as being un-African in my approach and interest when questioning or discussing issues such as gender equality and dignity, the overtly hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Church, and other social, cultural, political, and moral issues; with fellow African theologians. I am often reminded of that misperception by those who dismiss my interest and constructive criticism that Africans have more pressing needs and challenges than issues of environmental/ecological preservation, animal rights, public accountability by civil and religious leaders, gender equality, and selected social justice topics. For the most part, I am required to understand and accept that major African theological matters should be finding African ways to be authentically Christian and shedding the impact of colonialism in the collective psyche of Africans. Ideologically, my position on African theology is not far from that of those who dismiss my interest and criticism. Where we differ or disagree is in the praxis of the ideologies and the range of application of the ideologies.

All cultures need to continue to evolve and be dynamic. The elements of evolution and dynamism connote that cultural and traditional practices are not opaque and static. What we call Western culture today, at some point historically, had (and still retains) elements typical of patriarchy, gender discrimination and inequality, and the abuse of human rights prevalent in some African societies today. Human developments have conditioned and invoked commensurate developments in many Western cultural ideologies and practices. Africans cannot and should not be isolated from similar human developments and their concomitant cultural and ideological evolution. Jim Harris expands on this thought in his work and activities within “The Alliance For Vulnerable Mission.”² Harris’s project seeks to highlight the need for Africans to

develop the use of their languages for effective theological discussion. More importantly, the endeavor emphasizes the importance of Africans directly and exclusively funding such projects that are dear to their hearts. The goal is for Africans to make outstanding contributions to theology and to society on their own terms.

When many in the West make reference to African theology or theologians, they create the impression that African theology is still on a primitive and unrefined theological cruise, and that their theologians lack substance. Nathaniel Nidokwere (1998) criticizes some Catholic Church leaders in the United States who have demonstrated low esteem for the religious and clergy from the developing world.³ Many in the West often assume that the theology of people from the developing world offers little or nothing to the Western person. In reference to this assumption, James Cone writes, “the great problem with dominant white theologians, especially white men, is their tendency to speak as if they and they alone can set the rules for thinking about God.”⁴ Even Benedict XVI has alluded to and justified this assumption. In his 2005 address to the clergy of Aosta diocese, Aosta Valley, Italy, he describes vocation in Africa and Asia as flourishing because it produces a bunch of “wheat and chaff;”⁵ a euphemism for disingenuous or poor-quality vocations. Benedict XVI’s vile allusion to the kind of clergy Asia and Africa produce significantly represents the honest opinion of many leading voices in the West about African theology and theologians. According to Ndiokwere (1998, p. 219) “there are confirmed reports that African missionaries are not welcomed in Europe and the United States. They are needed, but not wanted.” He writes extensively about a leading Catholic theologian, Richard McBrien and a notable monk of the Assumption Abbey in Richardson, South Dakota, Reverend Terrence Kardong, both of whom disparage the presence of African clergy and religious working in the United States (Ndiokwere, 1998, pp. 227-233).⁶

For the purpose of substantiating a major argument of this article, it is imperative that a brief response is offered to these demeaning and condescending attitudes towards African theology by many in the West. Many theologians use their own Western context as the model of what is considered as ideal or normative in the Catholic Church. With the priest abuse scandal currently unearthed through most of the Western church and beyond, it begs to ask if the ideal or

normative Roman Catholic priesthood exists or ever existed in the West, which is the adopted homeland of Roman Catholicism. If the centuries of abuse and scandal that have been circumspect in holy secrecy (as is obvious today about the priesthood of Catholicism in the West) define the quintessential priesthood of the Catholic Church, it is about time for African Catholics to advance the discussion of how we want the African Catholic priesthood to be defined and structured.

Theology, like any other intellectual exercise, is both dynamic and evolving. To conclude that because someone is of African descent and therefore her or his theology is inferior to that of Western theologians lacks substance. The contributions of people of African descent in science, literature, the arts, engineering, and other disciplines of learning are evident. Apart from the long list of renowned theologians of African descent today, African theologians from the beginning of Christianity gave the religion significantly profound intellectual and moral leaderships. Augustine of Hippo, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Origen, and others of the early Church gave Christianity some of its most cherished scholarship and meaning in the Roman Empire.

In today's diverse social and cultural world and church, we should call for theological pluralism, which should appropriately accommodate and appreciate the values that African, Asian, South American, Caribbean, and other regional theologies bring to the world of theology. The social and cultural structures of the United States, for the most part, are conducive for a functional theological pluralism. Although we have an active theological and religious diversity in this country, religious pluralism has yet to be significantly appreciated and theological pluralism is still a mirage. Peter Phan, Paul Knitter, and a host of other theologians here in the United States have called for commitment from Christians to religious pluralism. Phan underlines the importance of this by advocating the integration of religious pluralism into theological education in seminaries and colleges.⁷ A society that accommodates and appreciates religious pluralism will more likely be open to promoting pluralism of theology. It behooves African and other non-Western theologians to amplify this call for pluralism of theology. That is an indispensable worldview required for effectively doing-theology as Africans in this and other non-African societies.

African theologians need to begin to propose and advocate for their theological opinion in the United States with the same pride and zeal demonstrated by other theologians. We need to quit seeing ourselves as people working on the periphery of theology and begin more effectively to move our theological expertise and scholarship to the center stage of theological exercises. American society, as one of the global centers of pluralism, deserves to be enriched with what African theologians have to offer. Likewise, because we are in the era of the global village, our theology while actively practiced in the United States is as relevant if not more than when we are back home in Africa. This is because doing theology here in the United States offers African theology and theologians a forum from which to be recognized. Therefore, African theologians must continue to improve theological explorations in both specific African theological issues and relevant global matters.

Theologians of Africa descent in the United States deserve to see themselves as part of the mainstream of America in theological discussions, as do their counterparts in medicine, computer science, technology, banking and commerce, social activism, and the arts. In her book *Post Black: How a New Generation is Redefining African American Identity*, Ytasha Womack unequivocally affirms that modern day African immigrants have broadened the definition of what it means to be black in America.⁸ The fairy-tale-like story of the son of a Kenyan becoming the president of the most powerful country in the globe today, is not only a source of pride for Africans but also an assurance that we are in a new age where identity has lost its old meaning, affirming the possibility of a sort of world citizenship for many. While the story of Obama has its spin, it is not an isolated case in today's growing global village societies.

There is a growing list of theologians of non-African descent who have been engaged in active and progressive African theological discussions and exercises. Their theological assumptions and conclusions have received continued approval and validation by previous and upcoming theologians of African descent. The theological claims of scholars of non-African descent who have been involved in African theology are as valid and credible as the scholarship of their theology can testify. Those theologians invested in African theology, especially those operating in the US are great allies of theologians of African descent. We African theologians need to

identify and collaborate with them to advance the causes of both African theology and theologians.

African theology and theologians need to collaborate with African-American theologians for the extension and accentuation of the goals of integrating African theology and theologians into the mainstream of theological discussions in this country. African-American theology and theologians have meandered their way into the mainstream of the American theological landscape over the years and there is much to learn from their resilience, scholarship, finesse, and tenacity. Theologians like Shawn Copeland, James Cone, Jamie T. Phelps, Gayraud S. Wilmore, James H. Evans, Gay L. Byron, LaReine-Marie Mosley, Deloris Williams, Jacklyn Granth, Bryan Massingale, Joan M. Martin, Victor Anderson, and many others have substantially and successfully advocated issues that are unique to the African-American people as well as issues they share with the rest of humanity.

Many African theologians working in the U.S. can find themselves lost when the expectation is that their theology has to be primarily Afro-centric. Such an idea suggests that they are unqualified to address theological issues of global appeal or those which impinge on Western society. It is preposterous to hold the presumption that because I am of African descent the only theology I can effectively engage in is a theology that is couched in an African worldview, when my theological training and academic development were formulated within a Western milieu and Western cultural ideology. While it is true that being an African doing theology in a Western milieu gives me an extended horizon, it should not diminish the importance, value, and scope of my theological scholarship and contributions to academia and society. While African theologians should be reminded that the standards of scholarship in the West do not need to be lowered to accommodate them, the quality and import of their scholarship should not be measured by false assumptions and bias. The success stories of a host of non-Western theologians in the US are uplifting. They include Peter Phan, Lemin Sanneh, Justo Gonzalez, Elochukwu Uzukwu, Gerard Boodoo, Sulayman S. Nyang, Teresia Hinga, Newell S. Booth, Jr, and Jacob K. Olupona.

As theologians, African scholars have professional and moral responsibilities to contribute to the theological development of not only Africa but also the global society. Africa is not and never will be isolated from the rest of the global community. African theologians have the duty and moral obligation to contribute to life in African societies as well as life in the places they call their new homes, away from the shores of Africa. Therefore, they have both moral and professional obligations to be relevant and responsive in their theological dialogue and research to the contexts they find themselves. They need to tap into their theological ingenuity to decipher how best they can apply their African experiences and discipline meaningfully in contribution to the theological landscape of America. This is a responsibility we cannot shy away from and one we need to engage head-on in order to remain relevant both as theologians and moral beings in a living culture and society like the United States.

Haight (2008) was right to observe, that African theologians have been involved richly in theology of inculturation. This aspect of theology is one that calls for both intellectual rigor and pragmatism. American society will benefit from both. Inculturation, as Avery Dulles argues, requires not only integrating into a particular basic Christian community, but also being “socialized into the universal church, with its shared meanings, common symbols, and normative behavior patterns.”⁹ Dulles (1988, pp. 41f) equally calls for reciprocity of cultures among Christians. If pluralism evokes the celebration of our differences, all Americans need to be reminded by African theologians that African cultural values and worldviews need to be celebrated in the “salad bowl” metaphor that reflects the United States of America.

Conclusion

The central argument of this article is that African theological views and African theologians’ voices need to be heard on a broad spectrum of issues affecting human society and life and not restricted to inculturation theology. Their views and voices need to constitute the mainstream on matters like ecological preservation, religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, feminism, religious freedom, government, social and political peace efforts, economic theology, distributive justice, gender equality, healthcare ethics, and a host of other human rights issues.

African theology and theologians deserve their dignity and respect in a pluralistic society like America. Nonetheless, they should earn respect and dignity rather than merely expect them to come their way by default. To earn respect and dignity as African theologians we need to be integral and major players in the field rather than hanging around the sidelines as cheerleaders. Currently African theological views and theologians constitute the minority in the religious and theological arenas, a situation that may warrant being considered less credible or less important. Such negative phenomenon is even more critical for young and upcoming theologians. The consequence of this phenomenon is manifest when editors and publishers measure the quality of the scholarship of African theologians by the syllable and phonetics of their last name (a prejudice other scholars with “strange” names also face) or the popularity they already enjoy. Securing a teaching or reputable pastoral position is like pulling teeth for an average African theologian in the job market. Regardless of these obstacles and challenges, the American theological landscape that is rich in diversity offers many opportunities for the nurturing and development of African theological worldviews and the voices of African theologians on a whole range of subjects and theological disciplines. Tenacity and unflinching commitments to our goals are the elixir we need to achieve them, short of those qualities we may remain on the fringe perpetually. Tenacity and unflinching commitment to one’s cause is the sure way of attaining success and achieving ones goal in the American society. The histories of successful movements in the US such as the civil rights, women rights, gay and lesbian rights movements amply highlight those values. Let those histories be our best teachers and models.

iwuchukwum@duq.edu

Marinus Iwuchukwu is an assistant professor in the theology department at Duquesne University. He specializes in inter-religious dialogue, religious pluralism, and media and religion. Dr. Iwuchukwu holds a master’s degree in journalism and a Ph.D. in theology, both from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Among his recently published works are a book titled *Media Ecology and Religious Pluralism: Engaging Walter Ong and Jacques Dupuis toward Effective Inter-religious Dialogue*, and several journal articles, “Engaging the Media as Effective Tools for Inter-Religious Dialogue in Multi-Religious Societies: A Catholic Evaluation” and “Democracy in a Multi-Religious and Cultural Setting: The Nigerian Context.” He is presently

chair of a university committee for Christian-Muslim dialogue and the international outreach editor of the *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*. In the past year, he has presented several academic papers at major international conferences in the United States and Europe.

¹ In the article Haight concluded that African theology is essentially focused on inculturation, suggesting that inculturation is the best African theologians have achieved in theological development since the Second Vatican Council. See Roger Haight, "Lessons From An Extraordinary Era: Catholic Theology Since Vatican II" in *America Magazine*. March 17, 2008.

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=10686, accessed 4/11/2010.

² Cf Jim Harris, "The Alliance For Vulnerable Mission." www.vulnerablemission.com, accessed 4/12/2010.

³ See Nathaniel I. Ndiokwere, *The Third Millennium Church: The Church That Will Survive*. Kearney, Nebraska: Morris Publishing, 1998, pp. 223.

⁴ See James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, p. xiv.

⁵ See Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Diocesan Clergy of Aosta," at Aosta Valley on Monday, July 25, 2005, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050725_diocesi-aosta_en.html. Accessed May 1, 2010.

⁶ McBrien has been one of the leading voices against the presence of developing world clergy and religious in the pastoral fields of the Church in the United States. In fact, he has continued to justify his low esteem for developing world clergy and religious. He has understandably also been a leading voice for a deep-rooted solution to priest shortage in the United States, but his justification for his opposition to the presence of immigrant clergy and religious only testifies to his preposterous assumption that clergy and religious from the developing world are either inept or deficient in training; thus, feeding into the stereotypical view of those in the West who hold African theology and theologians in disrepute.

⁷ See Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligious: Asian Perspectives On Interfaith Dialogue*. Maryknoll, New York; Orbis Book, 2004; pp. 78-81.

⁸ See Ytasha L Womack, *Post Black: How A New Generation is Redefining African American Identity*. Chicago, Illinois; Lawrence Hill Books, 2010.

⁹ See Avery Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of Church*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1988; p. 45.