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Out of Africa: How a New Generation of Theologians is Reshaping the Church

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Out of Africa

How a new generation of theologians is reshaping the church

BY AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. OROBATOR

Africa's theological landscape is changing significantly and rapidly. The pace and scope of this transformation came into focus at the first regional conference of the global network of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church held in Nairobi, Kenya, in August 2012. For three days, 35 African theologians engaged in intense conversation about pressing issues confronting church and society in Africa from the perspective of theological ethics. By many accounts this inaugural gathering did not resemble the usual theological talk-shop where scholars present abstract theses or ecclesiastical leaders declaim lofty doctrinal propositions. Judging by its composition, methodology and focus, the conference offered a glimpse of the shape of theology in Africa today and the promise it holds for the world church.

Three factors illustrate this phenomenon of change in theological discourse and scholarship. The first factor relates to demographics. Picture this: Nearly half the participants at the C.T.E.W.C. conference in Nairobi were women, both lay and religious. This is something new and different. A gathering of theologians where women are not in the minority is unprecedented in Africa. It would have been customary to have, at most, only token representation. Among the women theologians in attendance at the Nairobi conference, seven are in a C.T.E.W.C.-sponsored program for the advanced training of African women in theological ethics. This program will enable all of them to earn doctoral degrees in theological ethics from African universities within the next three years. A new generation of African women theologians is in the making across an ecclesial and theological landscape where hitherto they were unrepresented, their voices ignored and their contributions unacknowledged.

As the veil of invisibility lifts, African women are taking a critical stand on existential issues in church and society. They make their own arguments as scholars with passion, confidence and authority rather than being spoken about as passive objects in theological conferences and workshops conducted and dominated by male theologians. It should hardly surprise us that this new generation of theologically literate African women expresses its understanding of faith

and the concomitant ramifications for civil and religious society in a new and radical way. They open up new paths toward an action-orientated theological enterprise.

The advanced theological education of African women responds to one of the recommendations of the Second Synod of Bishops for Africa, held in 2009, for the formation and greater integration of women into church structures and decision-making processes. Judging by the tone and scope of the discourse at the Nairobi gathering, integration would not necessarily translate into unquestioning and submissive acceptance of subservient roles, to which many African women are confined in church and society. As a result of the theological formation of African women, we can expect to see an intensifying theological advocacy for the just treatment of women in Africa; honest recognition and appreciation of their dignity and contribution to society; and constructive harnessing of their talents and resources for leadership, ministry and participation in both the African and the world church.

A New Way of Doing Theology

A second sign of change on Africa's theological landscape is a palpable sense of energy and creativity. Among the participants at the Nairobi conference, the majority received their doctorates in theology less than five years ago. This means that a new generation of African theologians has emerged, primed to receive the mantle from the more seasoned generation of theologians who negotiated the transition from a colonial church to a truly African church, but ready to steer this church in a new and exciting direction.

The format of the conference took the shape of conversation—women and men, lay and religious, young and old exploring and raising probing questions, clearing new paths and articulating viable options. A critical component of this approach is readiness to listen and learn from one another. The setting of the conference recalled the African palaver model of dialogue and consensus in addressing pertinent theological and ethical issues. This conversation was led by new African scholars in dialogue with established scholars and ecclesial leaders. Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria; Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu, Uganda; and Bishop Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala of Tombura-Yambio, South Sudan, all attended the conference. Unusually, they

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participated not as keynote speakers but as conversation partners. In this role, the ecclesial leaders contributed to and enriched the conversation by offering candid views and relating moving personal testimonies of their experience of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. Here, again, something new is emerging across the continent: it is not customary for theologians to dialogue with ecclesial leaders on level ground.

A third striking feature of the conference was the variety of issues addressed by participants. On the agenda were the themes of the Second African Synod: reconciliation, justice and peace. Any observer of Africa and its predicament would understand why these themes are crucial for the church in Africa, a continent reeling from the trauma of ethnic division, economic mismanagement, human rights abuses, political bigotry and civil and sectarian violence. These crises affect the lives of all Africans. The ability and willingness of African theologians to tackle these vexing ethical challenges is a measure of the credibility and relevance of Catholic theology in Africa. The concerns of the conference participants reflect the concerns of contemporary theologians in the wider *ecclesia* in Africa. They go beyond the borders of church doctrine and discipline and relate to public and existential concerns. The catalog of concerns ranges from sociopolitical unrest in Northern Uganda and Ivory Coast to economic injustice endemic in the mining industries in Congo and Nigeria; from sexual, gender-based violence in South Africa and South Sudan to ethnic, religious and sectarian violence in Kenya and Egypt. Current conversations in theological ethics in Africa do not shy away from these complex ethical issues. Yet it would be mistaken to think that the focus is simply *ad extra*.

ON THE WEB

Excerpts from papers delivered at the
Nairobi theological conference.
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Justice in the Church

Also at issue are internal ecclesial concerns, such as the role and participation of African women in the church. Official rhetoric of participation, equality and gender justice in church is not lacking; oftentimes, it is stirring. But too often it remains at the level of rhetoric. African women theologians are leading the way not only in formulating a critical appraisal of the ecclesiastical status quo, but also in articulating alternatives to an inherited theological discourse that favors patriarchy and clericalism. There is growing recognition that the quest for reconciliation, justice and peace is as pressing for the church as it is for the wider society. And this quest cannot bypass or overlook homegrown solutions. This presents African theologians with a formidable, multifaceted task: first, to explore and identify these potential solutions; second, to articulate and analyze them systematically in conversation with the Christian tradition and Catholic social teaching; and, third, to propose workable models and applications at the service of the church's mission in a postmodern, globalizing world.

Those familiar with the African theological landscape would naturally link this methodology to inculturation. The three-stage process outlined above follows that familiar pattern. What is different is that the issues at stake are not just matters of sacramental and liturgical practice that have prompted some theologians to narrowly and erroneously depict the church in Africa merely as "the dancing church." This stereotypical portrayal of what church is and does in Africa flies in the face of what African Catholic theologians are talking about. The discourse has shifted. A quick sample of topics discussed at the Nairobi conference is enough to remove any lingering doubt.

Alison Munro, the South African nun who leads the H.I.V./AIDS Office of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, demonstrated how the daunting task of dealing with the AIDS pandemic in South Africa is integral to the church's mission of justice and peace. The Nigerian-American scholar Anne Arabome made a powerful argument in favor of justice as a practice that thrives only when women and men are accorded equal dignity in church and society. One of the seven C.T.E.W.C. scholarship recipients, Anne Oyier, drew on personal experience of sectarian violence to argue persuasively the case of holistic peace education as the path toward effective reconciliation and lasting peace in Africa. Elisée Rutagambwa, S.J., offered a model for overcoming the tension between the quest for justice and the necessity of reconciliation in concrete instances of violence, like those in Northern Uganda and Rwanda. And David Kaulemu, a Zimbabwean lay theologian, proffered a methodology for promoting social justice founded on mutuality and collaboration between the church and civil society in Africa.

There can be no question about the strong and dynamic currents that are now shaping the flow of theological discourse in Africa. A unique characteristic of this discourse is the widening circle of conversation partners. African theologians no longer content themselves with talking to like-minded theologians; they are talking to bishops, civil society groups and government representatives. This approach represents a new way of doing theology, in which collaboration and

conversation are preferred over confrontation. The result is a process of mutual listening and learning, a vital ingredient for constructing what the veteran African theologian Elochukwu Uzukwu once designated as "the listening church."

The Nairobi conference offers a new understanding of the nature and purpose of theology in Africa and in the world church. First, theology resembles a team event where the rules of engagement favor conversation over confrontation, even in the midst of tumultuous and neuralgic debates in church and society.

Second, theology is work in progress informed by on-the-ground realities. It is not about discussing arcane points of doctrine or resisting critical analysis. Theology embodies and delineates a shared space large enough to accommodate multiple quests to (re)interpret Christian tradition and Scripture through sincere and respectful dialogue in the unfolding context of church, society and the academy. In this space openness to personal conversion would seem a precondition for effective dialogue and action.

Finally, there is a generational turnover that recognizes the wisdom and legacy of established theologians but celebrates the promise and vitality of young theologians intent on furthering the mission of the world church. On the evidence of the dynamics and demographics of this generational turnover in African theology, we would be right to proclaim with Pliny the Elder: "There is always something new out of Africa!" **A**