

The Universal Value of African Traditional Religion (ATR): The Need for a New Approach in African Studies

Acceptance Speech by Prof. Francis Anekwe Oborji

(On the Occasion of **His Award as the Bestseller Author 2016** for His Book:
Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission, (AMECEA Gaba Publications, Eldoret, Kenya 2005), held at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), Eldoret Campus, Kenya, September 19, 2017).

Preamble:

My Lords spiritual and temporal, Very Rev. Dr. Jordan Nyenyembe, Coordinator, AMECEA Gaba Publications – Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) Press, former and present editors, directors/directresses, and all the staff members of AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press, participants at this year's Annual International Writers' Conference here present, distinguished guests, good morning all.

With all humility and heart full of thankfulness, let me begin with words of gratitude and appreciation to the Coordinator, the Editorial Board and entire Management of the AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press, for choosing my book and honouring me this day, as the Bestseller Author 2016. I am very grateful. Thank you so much.

It is very significant that this event is taking place during this year's Annual International Writers' Conference here at the Eldoret Campus of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. I appreciate highly the presence and good-will expression of all the participants at this most important conference, which, I was reliably, informed aims to encourage young African authors. I thank the organizers for this wonderful initiative. Africa needs to encourage and empower its young and emerging authors. I thank all the participants for your interest in this initiative which is evident by your presence here today in large numbers. It is our prayer and hope that something positive will come out from this our august gathering at Eldoret, Kenya this week. Once more, I thank all of you for your presence here today.

On July 7, this year 2017, I received an email from Dr. Jordan Nyenyembe (Coordinator of AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press), which reads:

“Dear Prof. Oborji, ‘*Shalom* to you from AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press.’ It is with much pleasure that I write to inform you that you were nominated as the first-place best-seller author in the ranking of best-seller authors of AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press, on account of your book: *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission* (2005). ... I therefore, humbly invite you to come and receive your prize on the 19th September during the opening session of the Conference which will start at 9.00 am.”

For me, it was like a dream reading this email from Dr. Nyenyembe. In fact, it took me sometimes to realize it was happening in the real world.

In the Preface to the second edition of his book, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann (1989), John S. Mbiti was marveled on how his book came to be publicized and appreciated by both the Publishers (Heinemann) and the readers, and already in its second edition. Thus, Mbiti writes:

“I also thank the publishers very heartily, for promoting the book, for facilitating its translation into other languages and for asking to have a new edition of it published. *It is amazing to think that the original manuscript was rejected by several other publishers before being accepted by current publisher.*”¹

Reading through these lines of Mbiti’s words, and receiving the Best-Seller Author Award today from the AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press, I am now in a position to appreciate the deep meaning of the saying that: “At the end of every tunnel, there is a light.”

I know that the selection committee of the Best-Seller Author Award of the AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press, may not have known about other things we went through before and after the publication of this book. It is true that the book till today is highly appreciated by both experts and students of African Studies on the meeting of Christianity with African Traditional Religion (ATR). The book I know has also seen several reprints by the Publishers since it first came out from the Press in 2005. The contents of the book, as is evident, no doubt, helped greatly those who prepared the preparatory documents for the last Synod of Bishops, Special assembly for Africa, 2009.

However, as would be expected with such a book on African studies from an African perspective by an African author, the book was not welcomed, initially, as good news by some few colleagues from certain quarters. However, there is nothing strange with that. In that, studies of this kind on Africa by an African usually, arouses such an emotion and reaction. On a lighter mood, however, ‘who knows, if the management of the AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press had known this, perhaps, they would not have thought of nominating it as the Best Selling Book of the year 2016.’ However, we need not recount here what we had gone through since then. Because as Mbiti noted, the important thing is that at the end of the road, God is glorified and the sacrifices of the author as well as the Publishers have not been in vain.

Therefore, you can imagine my joy today receiving Best Seller Author Award for my book, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission*. I accept the award with all my heart and thankfulness to the AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press. I thank them for their thoughtfulness and magnanimity. Thank you once more, for choosing my book for this award.

We have divided this short acceptance speech into two. In the first place, we shall highlight the task facing young African Writers and theologians today, especially, the importance of courage and determination on the part of young African authors. Secondly, we shall read from the last paragraphs of our Bestseller Book, to highlight both the universal value of ATR and the need for new approach in African studies.

1. The Task facing Young African Writers and Theologians Today

The first edition of Mbiti’s book, which we cited earlier, was published in 1969. My book for which I am being honoured today, was published only in 2005, thirty-six years later after Mbiti’s book. However, the same problem of rejection, which Mbiti’s book received, especially before publication from Publishers and world of academia is still with us. None of us Africans who have taken African context as his/her field of study and research is finding it easy. Many of us, in a way, have been accused of betraying Christ or the Church.

I say these things aware of the fact that we are here this week for International Writers’ Conference, which aims to encourage African scholarship or writing among our younger

¹ J.S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy* (second edition), Heinemann, Oxford 1989, xiii (emphasis added).

generations in the continent and diasporas. Young African authors must prepare themselves for a baptism of fire – of rejection, misunderstanding and sometimes, calumny and defamation. Because it is only by going through such an experience that one can begin to appreciate the work of the Holy Spirit in our continent and among our people – the grace of God working in our midst and environment for his church and the gospel. Again, because despite everything, God, at the end, comes to vindicate his own.

Our pioneers experienced such baptism of 'fire', as example of Mbiti cited above testifies. There are a good number of African theologians still carrying that cross today, though silently. However, the good news is that a greater majority of our scholars and theologians see it as a cross of love for Africa's redemption. As Jean-Marc Ela once observed, "for a very large majority of Africans today life has become a drawn-out Calvary experience, "a passion without redemption."² What is our theological response to this reality of our continent and people? This is the crux of the matter. Our theology is challenging us to be where our people are and journey together with them on the road of our history of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Thus, young African writers, especially, theologians must prepare themselves to undergo 'the baptism of fire for the redemption of Africa.' It is only in so doing that we can contribute immensely in making Christianity truly come home in Africa through our inculturated theology. This is the greatest task facing experts and students of African theology and Christianity today. The work of inculturation goes hand-in-hand with the efforts of African scholars towards creating a new language for theology and mission of evangelization in Africa.

This implies that Africa today, more than ever, needs a new model and language of mission in the continent. A point I once raised in an article published by Gaba AMECEA Publications in AFER in 2001.³ But the task of creating a new language for theology and Christian mission in Africa is not an easy one. However, it is a task worth its salt. It is a duty we owe to Africa and its people as theologians. My appeal is that we should not try to fail Africa in this onerous task. Let us continue the work on African theology and be more committed to it in spite of the seemingly difficulties and trials.

The mission of theologizing as an African today requires courage, strong faith in the Risen Lord, holiness of life, love for Africa and missionary spirit on the part of the African theologian and author. The African theologian must be prepared to be misunderstood as one engages in this mission. Christ experienced it among his own people. So were the Apostles, Church Fathers, great theologians and saints, down the ages.

In this regard, Congolese theologian and Bishop, T. Tshibangu instructs us to take clue from the examples of great theologians in the past and present day, e.g., St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, and Paul Tillich:

"They became great theologians because they tackled deep metaphysical questions and committed themselves wholly to their task. They accepted the demands of thought and action imposed by their own concrete situation. African theologians must be aware of this obligation to commit themselves to the situation and the issues of their time and milieu."⁴

² Cf. J.M. ELA, "The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ", in Y. TESFAI (ed.), *The Scandal of the Crucified World*, Maryknoll, New York 1994, 19.

³ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, "Towards African model and New Language of Mission", in AFER (*African Ecclesial Review*), 43(June 2001)3, 109-133.

⁴ T. TSHIBANGU, "The Task and Method of Theology in Africa", in P. PARRAT (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, SPCK, London 1987, 39.

We should also take example from those great pioneer African theologians, e.g., Vincent Mulago, Stephen Ezeanya, Peter Sarpong, John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, as well as contemporary authors of African theology such as Engelbert Mveng, Jean marc Ela, Charles Nyamiti, Benezet Bujo, Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, Laurenti Magesa, among others.

Nor have we forgotten the contributions of our great Women African theologians, eg., Mercy Amba Oduyoye of Ghana (the god-mother of African theology), Musimbi Kanyoro of Kenya, Isabel Phiri of Malawi, Teresa Okure of Nigeria, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike of Kenya, Maire B. Mbuy Beya of Democratic Republic of Congo, Musa Dube of Botswana, Philomena Njeri Mwaura of Kenya, and many others. They showed and are showing us the way. The first generations of African theologians have handed over the baton to our younger generation. Let us not disappoint them. They welded the storm of their day and came out vindicated. Their history is ours and ours is equally their history!

These great theologians were able to withstand the storm of their day because, like Paul of Tarsus, they know that the Risen Lord whom they serve does not make distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. Neither, does he discriminate between those who first received the faith and those others who receive the same faith later as Paul did. Because as Paul tells us: "God's message cannot be chained up" (2 Timothy 2:9-10). This is why Paul had to struggle against the attempt of those colleagues of his, "those narrow-minded believers", as he called them, who had continued to insist upon imposing an alien culture on the non-Jewish Christians (Acts 15:1-21).

Again, Paul's experience challenges us to continue with passion and courage in our chosen theological scholarship of relating the gospel to African reality and religious-cultural heritage (cf. Galatians 2:4-6; Acts 15:1-21; 2 Timothy 2:9-10). The Fathers of Vatican Council II recommended theological investigations in various cultural contexts of the Church-Family.⁵ At the African Synod of 1994, the Bishops tasked African theologians to continue with their great and noble mission of theological investigation in the meeting of the gospel with African cultural heritage and in the service of inculturation.⁶ This is our task as African theologians. We would not be the first nor the last to undergo experience of misunderstanding and discouragement in our chosen mission. However, the most important thing is that at the end, Christ is preached and his church honoured.

The point I want to emphasize is that today in Africa, we are privileged to have AMECEA Gaba Publications which since its inception has been in the forefront of promoting young African authors by publishing their works, especially in the areas of inculturation and pastoral evangelization. I urge them not to relent in this effort. Their work is unique in the whole continent. In other words, Africa today, more than ever, needs more houses of publications like the AMECEA Gaba Publications in all the regions and dioceses, if possible. We need to accompany the growth of Christianity in Africa with theological research and publications by Africans for African context. We cannot do this work effectively without our own African publishing houses like the AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press.

2. The Universal Value of ATR and the Need for a New Approach in African Studies

Finally, permit me to share with you some passages from our Bestseller Book, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion*. I want to read few paragraphs from the "Concluding Remarks" of the Book (pages 179-182). The concluding remarks is my summary of the aim of our

⁵ Cf. VATICAN II, Decree on Missionary Activity *Ad gentes*, 22; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 13).

⁶ Cf. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Special Assembly for Africa (1994), *Message*, 56; see also JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 63; BENEDICT XVI, *Africae munus*, 38.

book. We read from it because I want to buttress our point of promoting theological dialogue between Christianity and ATR, and the need for a new approach in African studies. I do this because my experience with this book since its publication as recounted already has proved to me that we still have a long way to go in our mental journey towards promoting a real mutual intellectual dialogue between African thought and the Western thought pattern in which many still base their evaluation of African Traditional Religion and culture.

The approach we adopted in this book (*Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion*), was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, it was aimed to establish the universal value of the African religion and its consequences in promoting the work of evangelization in the continent. Secondly, it was to help us emphasize the need for a new approach in African studies, especially in the areas of dialogue between Christianity and African religion and culture, and of the role of African churches in this regard. In whatever case, our concern has been to explore the universal dimensions of the African religion and to link the African people with the whole of humanity and the history of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The history of salvation teaches us that in Christ, God has chosen to enter into new covenant with the whole human family. The event of the incarnation underscores the salvific work as that of constant dialogue of God through Christ with the human family. The human person is the reason for God's salvific work in Christ.

Furthermore, the event of the incarnation teaches us that there is no section of the world (or cultural region) that was not part of the human race redeemed in Christ. The concerns in our study of the meeting of Christianity with African religion and culture are meant to help us recapture this fact. African people seek spontaneously a more universal religion and theology that connect them with the whole of humanity. In fact, most Africans have found this in Christianity. And so, as it is often said nowadays, "Africa is a new homeland for Christ." But for this to be realized, Africa's past, traditional religion and culture must be taken seriously and accorded the respect due to them.

a) The Universal Value of African Traditional Religion

In pursuing the first goal of our study, we were able to establish the link between the African worldview and the Christian and Western thought-pattern. We looked for a central element in both religions that could serve as a point of departure in promoting meaningful dialogue between the two traditions and in appreciating the universal value of African worldview. In that endeavour, we highlighted the theme of "life" in the two traditions as the central element for dialogue. Though the concepts of life in the two traditions are not exactly the same, however, the book emphasizes the fact that Africans have a yearning for life, which must be recognized and be seen as having found its fulfilment in Jesus Christ's offer of abundance of life and as giver of life to the world.

From there, the book demonstrated that the Africans have a valid concept of ontology which has found its fulfilment in the mystery of Christ. This is built around their vision of life, its security, prolongation, and preservation. It is rooted on the relationality between the beings in the invisible world and those of the world of man. Thus, with the theme of life as central to the two traditions, the book was able to relate the African concepts of ontology to the Christian category on which most scholars have based their evaluation of the African culture and traditional religion.

In other words, the book has argued that the Christian mission in Africa should not ignore this link in relating African concepts of life to the Christian mystery under discussion in catechetical work of evangelization. A sincere reflection on the nature of relationship between the concepts of life in the two traditions will no doubt promote the process of inculturation of the

gospel in Africa and enhance a better way of how peoples from the two traditions ought to view one another.

In this case, we appreciate the fact that ATR, in the logic of traditional theology and missionary theory of *praeparatio evangelica*, could be regarded a providential means, God in His divine Wisdom, prepared the forbears of Africa for the reception of the Gospel through proclamation.

Secondly, our approach has helped us to address some of the emerging concerns in African Christianity, namely, the question of co-existence among diverse African peoples in their various communities and nations. In discussing this issue, we noted that both Christianity and African Traditional Religion emphasize co-existence among neighbours and diverse peoples sharing one community or nation. Thus, drawing from African and Christian religious traditions as well as past experience of the continent, we presented some trajectories for strengthening and deepening the relationships among Africans of different ethnic groups living in the same Christian community and nation, and between them and people of other religions living in the same society.

Another pertinent concern in Africa today is the upsurge of the so-called independent or healing churches. We examined this phenomenon of the healing ministries under the premise that it is a challenging phase of African Christianity. However, as our investigations have shown, these healing churches do not represent the true African religiosity. They have been described as deformations or transformations of the traditional African religiosity. Moreover, one is at pains in watching the attempts in these healing churches to anchor Christianity in Africa on the spirituality of workers and seekers of miracles. Christianity as rooted on the Paschal mystery is beyond the ministry of consolation, no matter how desirable the latter may seem in contemporary African reality.

b) Towards a New Approach in African Studies

As already stated, the methodology we followed in this study was in keeping with the desire for a new approach in African studies. The way African scholarship was pursued in the past left much to be desired. As a result, the biased ideas and attitudes about Africa, have continued to haunt many, lingering on, as they do, not only in the popular mind but even in some learned circles and, like a suppressed cork under water, tend to pop up with relative ease at the least provocation.

Though, it is difficult to change one's frame of mind or perception of the other people, once it is formed, nevertheless, a positive evaluation of African religion could produce an immense contribution to the study and deepening of insights into African culture and life. It is for this reason that we have devoted attention in this book, discussing the universal dimension of ATR in relation to Christianity and the Western thought pattern. This approach has helped us to appreciate the central place of the African religion in the work of inculturation and in the creation of new cultural identity for the people.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (the renowned Kenyan author and novelist), in one of his lectures, pointed out that image resides in the memory and that the dialogue with the African religion and culture, as it were, is a process of helping the African people to draw their image themselves, unfettered.⁷ Images are very important. This is why many people like looking at themselves in the mirror. They like to have their photos taken. In many African societies, the shadow is thought to carry the soul of a person. But in our own context, we are talking of the image of Africa as a cultural, religious, philosophical, and even as physical, economic, political, moral and intellectual universe.

⁷ Cf. Ngugi wa THIONG'O, "Consciousness and African Renaissance: South Africa in the Black Imagination" (Memorial Lecture in Honour of Steve Biko), *New African*, 424(December 2003), 51.

In the dialogue with the African religion, there is tendency to show that this image resides in the memory. So also are dreams and hopes as well as the African concept of life. Thus, in discussing the meeting of Christianity with African religion, one sees the effort to retrieve the positive elements of African traditional religion and culture which have long been neglected if not scorned, and store them in the new African memory in Christ. This, in nutshell, is the perspective from which we have discussed the meeting of Christianity with the African traditional religion in this book.

Thank you for your attention and may God bless you all.

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