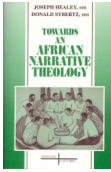


Book Review of *Towards An African Narrative Theology*



By Joseph G. Healey and Donald F. Sybertz

Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, Reprinted 1999.

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Reviewed by John Kwami Nyamidie

Something Good From Africa: Enriching World Christianity with African Wisdom

Two American missionaries with a combined experience of 75 years in Africa have come up with a model of spreading the Gospel by using parallels from African oral traditions. "One who sees something good must narrate it," says an Ugandan proverb. The following true story comes from Kilimambogo, near Nairobi in Kenya, East Africa and is taken from *Towards An African Narrative Theology*

(page 75):

"A 10-year-old child went out playing outside his home. He wandered down the path toward the forest and was attacked by a 12-foot-long python. At the child's screams, the mother came running. The men ran off to get their weapons to kill the beast. The boy screamed even louder so his mother jumped on the huge python as it wound itself tighter around the boy. With her bare hands, she forced it to release the child. Both the mother and the child went free."

This story illustrates the saying "where there's love, nothing is impossible." And the authors of the book say such stories can be used to preach the Gospel to Africans.

For centuries, missionaries in Africa believed that indigenous culture, beliefs and the people

themselves had nothing worthwhile to offer the world. Their indigenous practices were pejoratively called "tribal," "fetish," "heathen" and "pagan." Instances of this treatment by missionaries in Africa abound. Laurenti Magesa in his 1997 book, *African Religion* from Orbis Books, NY, cites the example of Father P. Perlo of the Consolata Missionaries in Kenya, East Africa.

Perlo wondered "how ... morals [could] be found among this people who in their age-long abandonment have become so corrupt as to raise practices openly immoral to be a social institution..." To Perlo "every moral principle in which our [Western] civilization glories and which our religion commands is here, at least in practice, simply reversed in terms: ... whatever inference is drawn in this connection it must always confront us with a state of things essentially deplorable, barbarous, inhuman."

Missionaries with this kind of mindset did all they could to "civilize" the Black Man. This civilizing mission involved programs aimed at making Africans forget their way of life and culture. For example, remembering ancestors was considered pagan and one could not be healed by the traditional medicine man. In the colonial schools indigenous languages were not taught.

Needless to say, many Africans protested. Writers such as Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Wole Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek, and Chinua Achebe criticized the missionary enterprise in their works. Politicians satirized Christianity. African Christian converts led two parallel lives. In the Church they were Christians. At home they were authentic Africans.

This shouldn't be so two Maryknoll Catholic priests Joseph G. Healey (61) and Donald F. Sybertz (71), say in *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, now in its third printing in three years. Healey, who hails from Baltimore, Maryland, has been working in East Africa since 1968. Sybertz comes from North Weymouth, Massachusetts. He has been working in Tanzania, also in East Africa, for more than 44 years. Both can read, speak and write Kiswahili, the common African language of East Africa.

Healey and Sybertz claim that they have found something good in the wisdom and values expressed in the oral traditions of the indigenous communities they have come to know and understand so well. And they want to tell others about their discovery. "Deep African values, such as community, hospitality, the 'living dead,' patient endurance in adversity, unity, and holistic healing bring something new and truly enrich world Christianity and the world Church," Healey and Sybertz emphasize.

What these two Maryknoll priests who have a combined experience of more than 75 years in Africa are saying about Africans is a complete departure from the general attitude of early missionaries who were prejudiced against the indigenous people and ignorant of the positive elements in their world view.

Healey and Sybertz say that to reach the African mind one must begin from the Africans' perspective. After many years of listening to the people in their indigenous language, the authors think that African "oral traditions" can be a point of departure for constructing a new model of African Theology in a dialogue of mutual respect. Proverbs, sayings, riddles, sacred stories, myths, fables, legends, plays, songs and folktales, personal testimonies, dreams and cultural symbols all contain "Seeds of the Word" which must be nurtured and allowed to grow among the people. "African proverbs, stories, myths and other cultural examples are used in their own right as a means of God's revelation. At the same time Christian tradition fulfills African culture," they say.

Some African theologians, such as John Mbiti, Peter Sarpong and Laurenti Magesa, are talking and writing about the richness in African oral traditions. However, African theologians have been unable to come up with the systematic and workable model that Healey and Sybertz propose in their work. This model, constructed from the dual sources of African human experience and Christian tradition, has three aspects. First, it is "doing" theology based on African narratives and it includes stories, myths, proverbs, sayings, and riddles. The second aspect is the actual writing of this narrative theology. Finally, it involves local African Christian communities writing a narrative theology.

With scores of biblical passages and refreshing parallels of proverbs and stories from almost every major Sub-Saharan ethnic group, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* is essentially a handbook of "earth and water" theology for missionaries in the context of indigenous communities.

The authors show how to present Jesus Christ, the Church, concepts of God and many other biblical mysteries in ways that the African can relate to in their daily lives. For example, the authors say that Africans are receptive to Jesus Christ when he is described as "Chief Diviner-Healer and Eldest Brother-Intercessor," and God is called "Father, High God, Sun, Supreme Being, Ancient Deity and Spirit of Life." The idea of Church takes on a special meaning for Africans when it's called "the extended family of God." It is the authors' belief that this model of evangelization, when properly adapted and applied in indigenous societies, will

ensure that more people will be receptive to the Gospel.

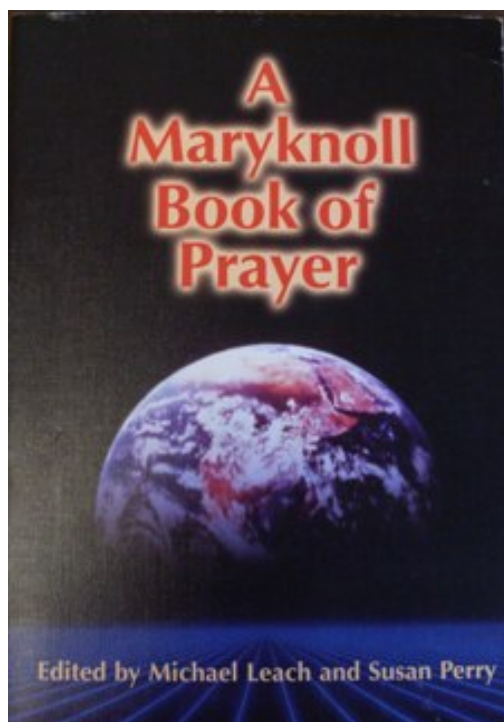
Towards an African Narrative Theology is a carefully researched work with the grassroots participation of Small Christian Communities in East Africa. It is a landmark work that truly echoes what some have called "A Fifth Gospel," the Good News in its power and splendor in the lives of today's Christians. This is not to say that this book will be useful to only the clergy or Christians. Rather, non-Christians, mystics, politicians, social workers, playwrights, poets, scholars and the general reader in search of new insights into the human condition will find it a valuable source for fresh ideas. They will have a better appreciation of the Ganda, Uganda and Kamba, Kenya proverb that says: "The person who has not traveled thinks his or her mother is the best cook" (page 337).

Healey and Sybertz have found a key to communicating with the mind of Africans. They have built the connection between the two parallel lives most African Christians experience. "On the overall journey of life, African human and spiritual values can call people back to their roots and give them new meaning and purpose." But if the authors truly believe in the inherent goodness of African wisdom and values, why are they trying to change it by engrafting them to Christianity? Their answer: "Nothing is complete outside of Jesus Christ."

Also, their treatment of polygamy and the celibacy of Roman Catholic priests, two deep concerns of Africans, deserve a more thorough treatment. Otherwise they fall into the trap others have fallen to which they eloquently describe in their book in these words: "It is not a matter of taking the traditional customs of African culture and making the best ones fit into Christianity... The priority is to be an African Christian rather than a Christian African" (page 19).

John Kwami Nyamidie, a former Catholic seminarian from Togo, West Africa, writes from Seattle, Washington State, USA.

Some of the African Prayers in this book can also be found in *A Maryknoll Book of Prayer*



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