

SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF

BLACK RELIGION

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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Society Members:

Greetings to you all! I hope you have been enjoying the Fall semester.

The Book of Ecclesiastes speaks of seasonal changes as a metaphor for social changes. Truly, we are in a season of dramatic and traumatic change. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of hate groups across the country. Violent crimes against Black women are increasing. The silent killer in the Black Church continues to be domestic violence, which is humanity devouring itself. And the activities in Louisiana reveal the on-going plan for the genocide of Black people in America. Each of these perversions of life have deep roots in America, and deeper roots in South Carolina.

Our next annual meeting ground will be Charleston, SC, March 6-8, 2008. Our program design is in its advance stages; and we are looking forward to a very stimulating meeting. Please make your plans now to be a part of the gathering where we will engage one another and reflect together on some of the most urgent challenges of the day. We will be meeting at the:

Holiday Inn Patriot's Point
250 Johnnie Dodds Blvd
Mt. Pleasant, SC 29464
843-884-6000

One of the distinguishing features of Black religious studies scholarship is our praxis orientation. We never intend for our work to be purely fanciful manipulations of information; rather we always intend for our work to be engaging and transformative of community. An important part of the Society's work together, in an historical sense, has been publications. As we look to the future, it is important for us to look for new venues for advancing our work as a Society of scholars. As a result, we are actively seeking to develop a Society book series. The series is envisioned to include monographs as well as the work product of session panels. If you are, therefore, invited to present a paper, it will be to our collective advantage to prepare presentations of publishable quality.

Our SSBR dues still remain quite reasonable by comparison to many of our guild memberships. Please send your annual dues of \$50.00 to our treasurer:

Professor Arthur Sutherland
Associate Professor of Theology
Loyola College in Maryland
4501 N. Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21210

Membership in the SSBR means fellowship with the members of the SSBR. Your presence is vitally important to all of us!

Cordially,

Lee H. Butler, Jr.
President

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

Dear Colleagues:

Greetings! Once again, it's time for the newsletter and an update on SSBR events. As a reminder, our 2008 meeting will take place in Charleston, South Carolina. The local coordinating committee is hard at work on securing the proper venue and developing the program. Concerning the latter, we can use your help: If you are contacted to participate on the program, please respond in a timely fashion. This will help us finalize the program with few last minute changes. In addition, if you have not already done so, please send your dues to our treasure:

Professor Arthur Sutherland
Theology Department
Loyola College in Maryland
Baltimore, MD 21210

Finally, we are constantly attempting to update our membership list. So, if you know that we are missing information concerning any members in good standing, please email that information to me (pinn@rice.edu).

Enjoy what remains of the semester, and I look forward to seeing you in Charleston!

Sincerely,

Anthony B. Pinn
Executive Director

TRADING INSIDE INFORMATION

Lessons Learned from Traveling, Studying and Teaching in Africa

Past President Katie Geneva Cannon invited members of the Society who have lead seminars to Africa to share with the membership their experiences of doing so. She invited them to reflect on the following questions but did not limit them to these:

What does an African travel/study seminar look like from your vantage point as the group leader/facilitator?

How have you borrowed or built upon conscientization that occurred during your travel, sabbatical leave, and/or missionary work in Africa?

What life-lessons learned during your visits to specific African cities and towns impact your classroom teaching?

What advice do you offer to SSBR members who would like to initiate an African travel/study seminar in our college, university, seminary, and/or church? Be specific in stating what we should and should not do.

Is there such a thing as going native for African American scholars conducting research in Africa?

Discuss what helps and hinders African American scholars and African scholars to live in solidarity when serving on the same faculty.

Share the names of at least three (3) African scholars and titles of their publications that SSBR Members need to add to our must-read list.

The following are our colleagues' reflections.

Lillian Ashcraft-Eason

Associate Professor, History Department

Director, Africana Studies

Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH

The Benin Seminar was conceived during a conference at York University in Toronto, Canada in August 1997 by Drs. Louis Djisovi Ikukomi Eason and Lillian Ashcraft-Eason (Bowling Green State University/BGSU) who solicited support for the seminar idea from Drs. Elisee Soumonni and Joseph Adande (University of Abomey and Calavi, Republic of Benin). By then, BGSU had been sending groups of students abroad to study for approximately 30 years. Several academic units offer seminars in Africa: French in Burkina Faso, music and art in Ghana, history and culture in Benin with five days in Ghana. Only an occasional Black student participated prior to the Benin Seminar. The BGSU husband and wife team wanted to increase that number and accomplished this goal with a majority of

participants being Black American.

They reasoned that Black students might become interested in a seminar that helped them understand more about themselves as descendants of enslaved Africans, while exploring the historical roots of traditional and contemporary Africa. Soumonni and Adande agreed to collaborate by seeking support for the idea from their university and making arrangements for ground transportation, hotel, lecturers, field trips, cultural arts workshops, and interactions with Benin university students and other African nationals in evening events arranged by the participants. The three-and-a-half week-Benin Seminar, which awards graduate and undergraduate participants 6-hours credit in history, has convened six times in Cotonou—taking students from their comfortable, air-conditioned with private hot and cold showers per room base into traditional areas of Ouidah (a major port of the slave trade), Abomey, Allada, Ganvie and via bus through Togo to slave fortresses, traditional palaces and arts centers in Ghana. Generally, the seminar runs smoothly, but participants are forewarned about possible water and electrical outages, transportation difficulties, high costs of telephoning back to the U.S., good food in Benin that ruins American diets. We tell them that if they want a BGSU experience, they should stay behind in Bowling Green and that they should be prepared to “take it as it comes” while in Africa and Europe.

In its maiden year (1998), the Benin Seminar consisted of 8 students—6 of them African Americans and 2 European Americans—with the two professors. It was the only group of students from the U.S. that year. As word spread about our seminar over the next five years, Wake Forest University and other American universities ventured into the francophone country upon realizing that language was no barrier to a full academic experience; these predominately White American students had come to Benin primarily to learn about contemporary Africa, its economy and politics. Like us, trying to be more than mere tourists—some of them brought books, vitamins, first aid kits, recycled computers, and blue jeans to share with the Beninois. All found that they brought more material possessions than they needed to lead a comfortable lifestyle in Africa, learning this after surveying the relatively smaller holdings of African peers. They also learn that what we think of as poverty is ameliorated in Africa by communal bartering and sharing.

The first BGSU students, armed with information from pre-seminar sessions readers compiled by the Easons, arrived with considerable curiosity about the continent and confusion about their identity. Claiming it as their ancestral homeland, they declared themselves to be Africans returning home. When we took a field to an archaeological site in Togo, students there laughed at the BGSU students, telling them that they were not Africans. As we sat in a bus, a group of Togolaise youngsters walking beside our bus and happened to look in; they pointed and shouted, “Look! Look! Those are Negroes—Black Americans.” Our students heard and began to work harder at discerning cultural and ancestral differences and similarities. They said, “They are right; we are not Africans. We are African Americans.” Yet they aptly wondered if the Togolaise and Beninise students knew how they had gotten to America.

The BGSU students began to ask if and what students in their host countries knew about the slave trade and slavery. Finding their peers to have limited knowledge, they began to inquire about courses on slavery. When they discovered that the universities offered no courses on the slave trade and slavery “because they did not want to stir up hostilities among the native populace,” the BGSU students were livid. In fact, they queried one professor so much that he brought a big stick with him to the next lecture to defend himself it attacked. They took every opportunity to discuss these subjects with host students. Professors in the universities began

to teach more about slavery abroad and about domestic slavery on the continent. Student discussions broadened to hip-hop, civil rights, politics, and economics.

The design of the seminar required that students learn as much as possible in a limited time about tradition. We continuously challenged them to peer beneath the patina of modernity to find tradition. They sat for divinations and on a limited occasion or two they observed the offering of sacrifices. They asked for Fon (Yoruba-related peoples in southern Benin) names and the recommended divinations for deriving them. They had a couple of hours of watching Zangbeto magic and dancing, observed Egungun masqueraders, attended Thron Church (a mixture of Vodou, Roman Catholicism, and Islam), saw a mother feed “replicas” of her deceased twins, had audiences with traditional kings, priests and chiefs in their native settings, spent a weekend in private modern homes of some our hosts. After visiting the home of one of the professors from the University of Abomey and Calavai at Porto Novo, the host asked if they would like to walk around the village. Walking through what seemed to be just a village and people dressed in traditional and modern clothes, we ventured upon a small gathering of priests; one was the chief Bokonon. When I went up to him, bowed my head, and announced that my deceased husband (Dr. Djisovi) had been a diviner, the host professor became bolder and took us into several Legba temples where priests were feeding the Vodun. The main concept of the seminar was dramatized right before their eyes not just in texts and lectures—beneath the patina of modernity is tradition, for just around the corner of the professor’s modern home and between the buildings and in backyards of villages, traditional ceremonies and practices were being performed/kept. The students said that they began to actually discern that this complementarity between modernity and tradition gave Africa its distinction.

Students endured the agonies and mysteries of crossing borders of African countries. When two females—one a youth fluent in French for crossing Togo and the other late middle aged, more wily professor—played out their femininity, that seemed to get the process hastened. While crossing Ghanaian checkpoints, the woman professor would open her window and shout out to the militia, “We are only your brothers and sisters coming from the United States to visit.” To this shout, the militiamen would reply, “Go ahead; take us with you when you come back through.” The combinations of a young African American woman fluent in French with an obviously older African American woman might work the process more smoothly than a foreign African male; reactions of the militiamen and immigration officers made us feel safer than we might have otherwise; we had heard stories of the long hours of delay for groups crossing the borders from Ghana when accompanied by a professor of Ghanaian origins but from an American university.

Nothing impressed the students as much as a touring slave fortresses. After visiting the Port of No Return in Ouidah, a site approximating the point from which thousands of Africans were shipped to the Americas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After visiting the Portuguese museum and chapel and the restored quarters of the notorious slave late nineteenth-century slave trader da Souza, examining the Tree around which the captive Africans marched several times before being loaded into ships, after standing on the ruins of a building in which captives had been held in the dark until they lost sense of geographical directions and were shipped away, students went to the Port. As they stood on the turbulent shores of the Bight of Benin, imagining the confusion and heartaches of the captives bound for America, the students wept. Their gloom deepened when they toured the fortresses at Elmina and Cape Coast, smelling the waste, experiencing the darkness, and feeling the

dampness of the dungeons. A priest simulated the prayers offered for the captives as they passed through the Doors of No Return. Reading about African support and opposition to the slave trade by towns, kings/queens, and merchants.

Some of the pathos of these shoreline dramas was captured in video footage from that 1998 seminar: Dr. Djisovi sang “When Will I See My Home, When I See My Native Land” as he and students went their separate ways down to the Bight of Benin in Ouidah. The 8 students and 2 professors darted the shore, each consumed with thought and the agonies of historical memories. One student left the seminar’s signature in the sand, as she printed in big letters, “I’m back!”

The academic, reflective journals that students kept of their voyage in Africa and assessment sessions throughout the three and a half weeks helped BGSU professors gauge the success of the seminar. Students compared histories and cultural traditions between Francophone and Anglophone Africa and between Africa and Europe. In the Louvre in Paris, we viewed the original “Ogun” statue after having seen the replica in Abomey. As any traveler to Africa can attest, virtually all of the original art from the slave trade and colonial eras is in European museums and galleries. Scores of thrones, royal and priestly canes and headdresses, and religious artifacts are housed in the institutional basements and, we were told, “Would never be displayed.” After touring a number of historical sites in and around Paris, students could indicate the wealth of France relative to that of Benin and Togo, and they guess that the story would repeat itself if they went from Ghana to Great Britain.

In the end despite having audiences only with kings, they learned that queen mothers and other women played influential roles in African traditional cultures and political institutions. Observing that diverse African peoples and religions coexist peacefully/tolerantly has allowed some participants to be more respectful of religious diversity in the United States. After talking with previous participants, Benin Seminar students (and guests) arrive on the continent knowing that African Americans are not Africans but rather descendants of African and, often, other ancestry. It seemed to be effective for leaders of a seminar designed to help participants better understand the African-American experience(s) to be African American paired with African supporters. Students continue to astound BGSU professors when they declare that the seminar was a “life altering experience” for them.

Marsha Snulligan Haney

Associate Professor of Missiology and Religions of the World
Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia

Introduction

The purpose of this presentation is three fold: to identify a key area of ‘inside information’ gained from more than 25 years of traveling, studying and teaching in Africa, including three years living in North Africa (Sudan) and three years in West Africa (Cameroon); to respond to the inquiry of whether outsiders can become insiders, that is whether or not it is possible to “go native” in conducting research in Africa; and, to raise questions related to how Africans and African Americans scholarship and research may be enhanced by engaging in a Pan African transcultural, transnational and interreligious exchange known as dialogue.

I am honored to have been invited to sit on this panel and want to express my thanks

to the leadership, not only because I think the topic is an important one, but also because I believe that my chosen academic and vocational discipline, that of Missiology and Religions of the World, (two intentionally interdependent disciplines used to signal a non-traditional understanding of missiology) has much to contribute. The missiological perspectives afforded by many of the African missiologists mentioned in this presentation, like my own, is not one that is predicated on 18th, 19th and 20th century missional practices, but rather one that is the result of critical reflections of people who are involved in various struggles of theological liberation and theological reconstruction in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It is one that seeks to build community and empowers missiological builders based on contextual theologies and the multi-intelligences of people formed in their local contexts, recognizing the value of that experience within the global community, and therefore is able to identify and provide resistance toward imperialistic tendencies.

Missiology—if it is to be perceived as authentic, relevant, holistic and liberating—is built on two key theological constructs, *missio Dei* and *imago Dei*, that serve to challenge any emerging dominating, or conquering theologies such as theologies of “other-ness or conquest” that dehumanize or view people as objects instead of subjects; or, American “theology of empire” which connects our foreign policy in religiously inspired “mission” to promote American gains over the world, including “protector” of religious freedom. Because religious missiology (a) is dependent on and related to both western and non-western peoples (b) takes seriously the culture concept, (c) has developed the concept of worldview and worldview theory, (d) takes a holistic view of people (dealing with the whole range of human behavior rather than segmenting humans into various compartments), (e) focuses on communications and understanding people in relationships, and (f) has developed the field research method most helpful to religious workers, that of ‘participant observation,’ the concept as a generic entity provides a lens from which to view Islamic and Christian mission theology and mission practices.

Based on theological and anthropological understandings that emerge from the core of culture and at the very heart of all human life where basic assumptions, values, and allegiances are formed, contemporary missiological perspectives takes seriously Africans and the contexts in which they interpret and behave. The contributions of ethnic studies, post-colonial and post-independence scholarship, and marginalized theological studies of Africa and throughout the African Diaspora continue to provide invaluable insight into how and why it is important it is to understand the religious worldview of any people through encounter and engagement.

It is in this regard that Katie Geneva Cannon’s methodological approach of “human archeology,”¹ and the related notion of “spiritual geology” is most helpful in their

1 See *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. Human archeology is described as a form of inquiry that involves a deep examination of human relationships, developments, and experiences that seek to uncover mask, persona, and person’s identity. It requires a sustained dialogue, whose success depends on extraordinary trust, empathy, symmetry, and synchrony between the storyteller and the narrator. I have extended this concept by coining the phrase “Spiritual Geology,” used to describe as a form of inquiry that involves a deep examination of what it means to be human in relations to the quality or state of being spiritual or religions. We seek to unmask and discover the activating or essential principles influencing a person’s personal growth or lack of growth. It is the stud of the solid matters, principles, and powers we embrace to give life to our physical organisms. It is

intercultural and interreligious transportability. Therefore, in the spirit of trading inside information, what has become most evident to me is the need for the Western theological academy where missiological studies are marginalized, to take seriously Africans and their scholastic contributions in the area of Missiology, and to do this best through dialogue. African missiology tends not to be reduced to only one aspect of its dimensions, and neither is it viewed as a tool for the expansion of the church, or even of a particular denomination. When viewed from an African perspective the devastating historical associations with slavery, colonialism, imperialism, racism, and sexism are still evident; however they don't obscure how Africans, both Christian scholars and Muslims scholars, have and are responding in their contexts, as missiologists concerned with addressing both local and global mission challenges in this millennium from an integrated and holistic perspective. This is of particular significance in light of the dislocation of the West as the cultural and intellectual center or epicenter of Christianity.

African Christian Missiology

At the 24th General Council held in Accra in 2004, the General Secretary of World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Setri Nyomi spoke of the mission implications to “recognize, education and confess’ and the need to overcome fragmented and disunited ways of doing mission.² Isabel Phiri, Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, at the same gathering suggested that we must contrast colonial interpretations of mission, in which spreading the gospel often went hand in hand with European imperial expansion, with the biblical understanding of mission as God establishing a relationship with God’s world. She states, “In their mission practice, churches need to learn from Jesus, who saw mission as bringing out wholeness in people.”³ Certainly the African initiated Christianity in Eastern Europe known as the Church of the “Embassy of God” in the Ukraine, under the leadership of Nigerian born Pastor Sunday Adelaja is changing the paradigm of what an African Initiated church is by performing an African initiated missiology which is perceived by those in the local Ukraine context as meaningful, liberating and transforming.⁴ In addition, take notice of this statement from Jehu Janciles, a Sierra Leonean missiologist.⁵

For African Christians, careful investigation of this movement remains a priority not only because it provides critical connection points for self-identification but also because African perspectives and an African imagination are indispensable for a full understanding of the impact and legacy of the European-African encounter. That story is as much African as it is European. Exaggerated claims for the Western missionary movement and European initiatives have long dominated history construction and analysis so related to the spiritual self-understanding in relations to God and the world.

2 See *Reformed World, 24th General Council, Accra 2004: Mission, Justice and Covenant*, Volume 54, No. 1, March, 2004: 12.

3 Ibid.

4 See J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu’s article in April 2006 edition of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*.

5 Read “Missionaries and Revolutionaries: Elements of Transformation in the Emergence of Modern African Christianity” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 28, no. 4:146, 2004).

much so that the African (or non-Western) element has been portrayed simply as passive, dependent and exploited.

He is referencing the tremendous growth of Christianity in Africa, and the opportunities and challenges for scholarship, dialogue, and engagement. The history of Christianity in Africa, which stretches back to the early church beginnings, is today giving evidence of the emergence of Africa as an epicenter of the Christian faith. This reality is a consequence of both the extension of extensive Christian recesses within Europe and North America, and of the phenomenal growth in the non-Western world of Southern (non-Western) Christianities, especially in Africa, and especially among the poor. Janciles' voice like that of another African scholar, ethicist Emily Chogee who is developing a missiological perspective based on "a theology of uprootedness" as a call to uncover the critical historical insights gained from African scholarship and theological education since the 1960's, and particularly to uncover the full range of African voices, reactions, interpretations, and experiences in mission and the impact of African Christian mission activities on the development of African Christianity, nationalism, political consciousness and nation building. They like, Lamin Sanneh, agree that African, non-Western, assessments on mission are critical, "if only because without this Third World dimension, mission would languish as the flawed instrument of alien subjugation, and an important part of Christian history would thereby be lost."⁶

An African Islamic Missiology

Upon graduating from seminary, my first ministry assignment spanning three years was to work with the Sudan Council of Churches in the southern capital of Juba developing religious education curricula with the government's Ministry of Religious Education. This was the beginning of my commitment to missiology as dialogue with persons of other living faiths. While in my first book, *Islam and Protestant African American Churches: Challenges to Religious Pluralism* (1998), I presented an understanding of the growth and development of Islam within the African American community and identified factors attributed to and confronting this reality, it was in the second book, *Africentric Approaches to Christian Ministry: Strengthening Urban Congregations* (2006, co-edited with Ronald E. Peters) that an African centered spirituality served as the core inspiration.

In 1997 while engaged in a four year research on a project focused on Muslim and Christian relations sponsored by the University of Edinburgh, Centre for the Study of Non-Western Christianity, a Muslim scholar made the following observation which became a key area of inquiry for me: "Muslims left Africa [during the slave trade] with the Qur'an, they endured with the Qur'an, they were maintained by the Qur'an and they are now returning

6 ⁶The mission research and work of Kwame Bediako, director of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Center for Mission Research and Applied Theology, in Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana, and author of *Christianity in Africa, The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (1997), along with *Beads and Strands: Reflection on an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 2204), Archbishop Yesehaq's *The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church: An Integrally African Church* (1997), works by Professor J. N. K. Mugambi (*From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War*), and a recent publication, *Freedom's Distant Shores: American Protestants and Post-Colonial Alliances with Africa*, offer keen insights into this new phenomena of the growth of Christianity from a variety of invaluable Christian perspectives.

with the Qur'an." The reference, made in response to the large number of African American Muslims who were visiting the Ghanaian ports of no return (slave castles), was representative of a broader global Islamic missiological perspective focused on what has been described as the 'unprecedented feat of the 20th century'—that of a tremendous number of converts from Christianity to Islam, specifically based in the African American community, beginning with Malcolm X and his pilgrimage to Mecca in the 1960's, and continuing to the present day. Utilizing religious imagination based on contrast myth making, meaning making, and the contextualized theology embodied in this statement, it is possible to extrapolate key missiological phenomena related to an understanding of Islamic contextualization. Not only does the statement reveal an Islamic contextualization that affirm the spirituality of African people (Peter Paris), and substantiates God/Allah's omnipotence over history, but it also reveals religion, specifically Islam as a sustaining system (way of life) easily accessible. The observation also provides an assessment of the respectful place of Islam in the history of African and African-American peoples. In addition, it communicates deep knowledge that locates African and African American relationships in an effort to shape a new global reality based religion and politics. Also, such a belief serves to emphasize the priority and importance of the Qur'an in the relationship of African and African Americans, one that deepens the experience and faith of Islam for the communicator, and as well indicates a basic concern across time and space that all human experience is both personal and social.

As we gathered that day in 1977 at the University of Legon in Accra, a vision was planted: is it possible for African and African American theologians and scholars, Muslims and Christians, to dialogue, gather historical data and develop our own perspective on our own mission histories? Given who we are as North Atlantic scholars, and situated in the institutions and communities we belong to, are we able and willing to enter into a healthy international, intercultural and interreligious dialogue with Muslims and Christians of Africa? If so, how and where do we enter the dialogue? How do we do so in such a way to meet the challenge of Botswanan Musa Dube who has suggested that the academy may be of no practical good in impacting daily life?

For instance, is it possible to engage in transcultural and transreligious research on HIV/Aids, faith, and religious leadership to explore how religion can both help and hinder the processes of spreading the prevention message and halt the spread of disease? Is it possible to engage the issues of conflict in Darfur (Sudan) in such a way that the academy can have a practical impact on life and death issues, and theologians and scholars can impact public polity? Can we develop insights leading to the creation of a "theology of poverty" that is able to provide solutions to hurting communities in both contexts? How can we engage innovative and emerging models of research that are grounded in historical evidence and that can be evaluated and replicated in other communities?

The Challenge of Academic Dialogues

In conclusion, no, outsiders can never become insiders; however, it is important that we embrace intercultural empathy, and engage issues of dialogue, mission theology, and mission practices that enable us to learn and teach together, and from one another. As we experience *ubuntu* and recognize our need for one another and the scholarship we offer, it is then that we are able to experience the reality that authentic and effective mission relationships with Africa requires a multidimensional and interreligious dialogue. This dialogue may be built upon the considerably long history of African American Christian

mission in Africa, giving attention to various cultural forms, practices, and persons (such as Edward Blyden) , and should acknowledge current dialogues of African immigrant Christian communities within the USA. We must recognize that the concept and practice of dialogue is the great new missiological reality of the 21st century, in that

it has changed the method of mission and even the identity of the missionary...when we speak of dialogue we do not mean merely taking together, but a cultivation of interpersonal relations among individuals and groups to gain a better understanding and appreciation of one another, working together and enriching one another and thus promoting greater unity among peoples and religions....it also has an influence on the way we live together in this world, moving us to make it a more fitting dwelling place for human beings.⁷

This is not to suggest that the engagement will be easy because:

*Every form of dialogue has cultural implications. There is no religion that has not been influenced by culture, and there is no traditional culture that is not touched and animated by religion”...consequently “...there can be no worthwhile interreligious dialogue that is not simultaneously intercultural dialogue and that does not take account of the cultural dimension...therefore... interreligious dialogue must inevitably be conducted in a particular cultural context.*⁸

Clearly how members of SSBR who maintain a theological bend toward Africentric thinking are able to engage in and sustain an intercultural and interreligious dialogue with some African and Muslim theologians is of concern. Related to Africans avoidance of Africentricity, it is said:

*It is a little wonder that in Ghana, we have a saying that literally translates means: “When you have seen the white man you have seen your God.” That is total blasphemy and an abomination! It is supplanting the image of God with the image of man. In order to change that concept, black people have advocated that Jesus Christ should be portrayed as a black man. That is swinging from one extreme to another. Their frustration is real but the answer is wrong.*⁹

What African missiologist Tinyiko Maluleke acknowledges—that the close relationship between mission history and western colonial expansionism has lefts some deep

7 See Marcell Zago, “Mission and Interreligious Dialogue” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July 1998: 98.

8 Ibid., 101.

9 See Ezekiel Olagoke, “Global Christianity: African Christians on American College Campuses” in *Religion, Culture, Curriculum, and Diversity in 21st Century America*, 2007.

scars in the African psyche and in African church life¹⁰—is also true of African Americans due to the close relationship between mission history and enslavement. This secret is this: the agenda of human development, maintenance, and flourishing in life is the outgrowth of a clear sense of purpose and direction for our communities, and is a common agenda that extends beyond ethnicity, culture, religion, and we experience it by naming who we are and articulating our missiological truths in light of our contextual understandings, experiences and knowledge.

Peter J. Paris

Elmer G. Homrighausen Professor of Christian Social Ethics Emeritus
Princeton Theological Seminary

I first went to Africa nearly fifty years ago. The Reverend James Robinson, pastor of the Morningside Heights Presbyterian Church in New York City launched his Operation Crossroads African Program in the summer of 1958. I was invited as the sole Canadian to join the group of sixty students in a work-camp study program taking place in five countries in West Africa. My group went to Nigeria. The purpose of this cross-cultural program was to live and work with African students for ten weeks with the expectation of learning from one another. The significance of that program was demonstrated when John F. Kennedy introduced his Peace Corps program by saying that it was modeled after Dr. Robinson's Operation Crossroads Africa program.

It is difficult to describe the ethos of those days. Suffice it to say that the atmosphere was charged with the spirit of euphoria. Many countries in Africa were in the process of becoming independent sovereign nations after nearly a century of colonial rule. Ghana had gained its independence the previous year in 1957 and Nigeria was destined to gain its independence in 1959. We had the privilege to stop over in Ghana for a few days en route to Nigeria. What an extraordinary experience that was.

The year 1958 was filled with expectation. Chinua Achebe, at the age of 26, published his great novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which launched a new literary genre. It soon became one of the greatest best sellers of all time. The later Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, had just started staging some of his early plays at what was then called, The University College of London in Ibadan, presently called the University of Ibadan. In anticipating the implications of political independence for the churches, The Christian Council of Churches published a study book called *Christian Responsibility in an Independent Nigeria*.

Now, virtually everything has changed since those days. At that time, making trans-Atlantic telephone calls was very difficult and much of the news of the world was received via short wave radio. By contrast, it is now possible and even desirable to look up the country you propose to visit on the internet so as to get an up-to-date briefing on such things as the following: (a) the year of the country's Independence; (b) the present head of state; (c) prominent newspapers; (d) demographical data on the particular ethnic group(s); with whom you will be spending most of your time, and almost any other information you wish to have.

In preparing to visit Africa, I would pass on the following bits of advice:

10 See *Reformed World*, 24th General Council, Accra 2004: *Mission, Justice and Covenant*, Volume 54, No. 1, March 2004: 12.

1. It is much better to read a novel by a prominent African writer in the country you are visiting than to read enormous amounts of historical and social scientific texts or even travel guides because the best way to encounter the soul of a people is through its arts of which literature is one. Music, song, and dance are similar sources of knowledge. Today much of the latter is available in videotapes, DVD's, public television archives, etc.
2. You should know that all African countries are so-called third-world countries. Demographically that means that the few are wealthy; the many are poor. Each has a very small middle class. Because you are from a wealthy country, you will have direct access to the society's elite with very little effort.
3. Remember that youth in Africa are likely to know much more about government and political matters than youth in the U.S.
4. Remember that your hosts will view you as Americans and hence representatives of their image of the American; i.e., wealthy; overly casual in demeanor and dress; insensitive to different cultural values; having the propensity to measure everything by American standards, etc.
5. More often than not most of your assumptions will be wrong. By contrast from the American context, you should know the following: (a) that in Africa "race" is not a meaningful analytical tool; (b) that the people do not view themselves as "black" or even as "Africans" because the former is an American designation and the latter is a colonial construct; (c) that young people do not openly disagree with elders; (d) the art of greeting people and relating to them differs greatly from the American style.
6. Remember that having a cultural guide is a necessity. That person will be able to interpret what is going on. Otherwise, you will not understand the situation in which you find yourself. Do not assume that because the people speak English, you will readily understand what is going on. In fact, you cannot rightfully interpret what you see without an interpreter since you will invariably be interpreting everything through your American lenses.
7. Ask your interpreter about the ordinary taken-for-granted things in life in order to see how the traditional practices are infused in the modern and/or Christian practices; e.g., naming ceremonies; traditional betrothals; weddings; funerals (e.g., more often than not parents do not attend funerals of their children); anniversaries; memorial services; ancestral devotion; festival days; structure of the market place; days of market closings;
8. Remember that all Africans are communal peoples. Communal responsibilities have many positive and negative features. Most important, the spirit of individualism is considered a major evil.
9. African peoples live in close contact with much diversity of religion; class and ethnic groups. Consequently, they are much more tolerant of difference than westerners are. For example, the local traditional priest offers a sacrifice in the market place each week on behalf of all who live in the community. That includes Christians. Ironically, Christians cannot pray for the well-being of the traditional priest as can the traditional priest. Rather, Christians usually pray for the conversion of the traditional priest which implies that they desire a radical change in the priest.

10. The principle of reciprocity pervades the society. Those who receive are expected to give. Thus, all acts presuppose reciprocity. Women who receive gifts from men are expected to reciprocate. Often western women are surprised to receive proposals for marriage from someone who has previously showered the person with gifts that were willingly accepted.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ANNUAL MEETING DATES

- 2008 6-8 March, Charleston and the Sea Islands of South Carolina
 2009 26-28 March, Washington, DC
 2010 The 40th anniversary of SSBR, Atlanta, GA
 2011 Bahia, Brazil

TRANSITIONS

Emilie M. Townes, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology at Yale Divinity School, has been named associate dean of academic affairs. When she assumes the post in July 2008, Townes will become the first woman and the first African American to serve as the school's top academic administrator.

NEW AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS BY SOCIETY MEMBERS

Anthony B. Pinn and Gregory Colleton, eds., *Life Sentences: Short Stories* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, December 2007).

Anthony B. Pinn and Allen Callahan, eds., *African American Religious Life and the Story of Nimrod* (Palgrave Macmillan, December 2007).

MEADVILLE LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL announces an opening for a full-time **PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION** to begin September 2008; rank open. We seek candidates who can provide leadership for an integrated program of seminary education that incorporates public witness, neighborhood engagement, and learning throughout the life span. As an academically rigorous, spiritually grounded and unapologetically progressive theological school, Meadville Lombard is committed to a vision of Religious Education that embraces the whole person, engages the context of social life transformatively, and explores the urban situation as a key site for liberal religious life. Our ideal candidate will be a teacher, scholar and leader who will facilitate a collaborative, interdisciplinary, intercultural and interfaith learning environment within the school and the larger community.

We invite candidates who are grounded in a liberal religious heritage and are sympathetic to Unitarian Universalism and our commitment to justice, equity and compassion. We strongly encourage women and minority applicants. Candidates will have either a Ph.D., D.Min., Ed.D in religious education, practical theology or another related field, or an M.Div with extensive practical experience in religious education and/or community ministries.

Meadville Lombard Theological School is an independent, accredited, graduate theological seminary, offering the degrees of Master of Divinity, Master of Arts (Religion), Doctor of Ministry, and a dual degree of Master of Divinity/Master of Social Work with the University of Chicago. Our graduates enter Unitarian Universalist and other ministries, as well as education, social service, and leadership in voluntary associations. We design and offer courses with special relevance for those who are summoned to ordained ministry, for experienced ministers intent on furthering their understanding and leadership, and for a laity that yearns for serious reflection and renewed commitment--for all

who seek to change lives to change the world.

Affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association, the University of Chicago through its Divinity School, and in cooperative relationship with the members of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools, Meadville Lombard provides training for the liberal ministry in an ecumenical setting and in the context of a world-class university. For more information, see our website: www.meadville.edu

Application Process: Interested candidates should send a letter of application, a current curriculum vitae, and three letters of reference to Dr. Sharon D. Welch, Provost, Meadville Lombard Theological School, 5701 South Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 606037. Application materials may be sent electronically to the academic office administrator at academicofficeadmin@meadville.edu Applications received by November 12, 2007 will be considered for interviews at the AAR/SBL meeting in San Diego. Review of applications will resume December 7, 2007 and will continue until the position is filled.

BRSG Annual Consultation will be held in conjunction with the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature. This year the consultation will take place on Friday, November 16, 2006 from 7:00-10:00 pm at St. Stephen's Cathedral Church of God In Christ in San Diego, CA. Our annual community dialogue will focus on the theme: "Making It Plain: Speaking Truth to Power and Empowering the People."

We will be celebrating religion scholar and public intellectual, Rev. Dr. Cornel West as the 2007 BRSG honoree for his significant contributions to both the Academy and the Church. The invited panelists who will serve as our Council of Griots are Rev. Dr. James Cone, Rev. Dr. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Rev. Dr. Peter Paris, Dr. Vincent Harding and Dr. Anthea Butler. As the 10th anniversary, this evening promises to be the best consultation yet!

Registration is \$20 and is due November 12th. Ground transportation will be provided at 6:15 pm from the San Diego Marriot Hotel and Marina street lobby entrance. Registration brochures and publicity poster will be mailed out shortly. But you can send your checks payable to BRSG in advance to:

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Fort Worth, TX 76129

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