

At a Crossroads – Race, Africans and the Anglican Communion

One of the significant issues that emerged at the Lambeth Conference of 1998 was race. Given the dominance of the white and western narrative, the matter was eclipsed by the sexuality question. This is in no way suggesting that sexuality is of lesser importance. Rather, race and sexuality are intersectional and only a hegemonic narrative can seem to explain one without the other. To insist on this point is to expose the Anglican Communion's race Achilles heel.

What I continue to make of the sexuality issue now is that it was a "presenting issue." Even the out-workings of that discourse have exposed the race question. Both the Western rightist and those on the left in the sexuality discourse have, in not so subtle ways, demonstrated colonial tendencies and stances that are Darwinist in relation to the Africans. It is so idiomatically and hegemonically, such that the overall effect is a systematic erasure of inherent racist attitudes which have become endemic in how sexuality is debated.

When Bishop Spong insulted the Africans (two weeks before LC 1998) by saying that "Africans are just one step from witchcraft" and thus too backward to comprehend the issues, the response from westerners was more embarrassment than true owning of the gravity and pain felt by Africans. What was and is more disconcerting in this regard was that after the vote and return home condescending deflection abounded. Many American bishops, in the face of criticism by their people, claimed that they had voted with the Africans, only in solidarity. They could not take responsibility for their vote but scapegoated the African, which generalized the diverse views held in Africa on the matter. That strategy harkens back to a distinct racist narrative among westerners which seeks to denigrate and dehumanize people of color and especially Black people. An intentional listening (another fruit of LC 1998) needs to begin, engendered and acted upon in word, attitude and action.

Africans have to be vigilant about being used by either side of the western power struggles. Christopher Brittain and Andrew McKinnon in *The Anglican Communion at a Crossroads*, have done some analysis of this situation. Our colonial acquiescence has to go. Until we rise to the challenge the situation will remain the same and the fullness of theological discourse and the Gospel would remain unheard. We only need to look at preferment in different church structures and the dominance of western idiom in theological discourse and not least theological college syllabi and bibliography. Black Lives Matter, African Bodies, African Images, African Voices, and African Leadership matter! Gungi wa Thiongo's *Decolonizing The Mind* and *Something Torn and New* are a good place to begin from the African literary tradition.

One is tempted to imagine that singling out Africans is splitting hairs, but that would be to miss the point. The world as it is set up now is such that in the food chain, the African is at the bottom rung, even below the diaspora African. In the Arabian Peninsula we are Abdi and Habshi and the Siddis in India are considered less than the untouchables. The Chinese and Japanese have their own not so generous attitude to the African. On African soil, in the Maghreb the attitudes aren't so different as those in the Arabian Peninsula. The Anglican Communion still reflects a lot of this in some of its outlook and behavior since the 19th Century. Owning and confronting this anti Gospel attitude and systemic specter is long overdue.

As we speak we have heard reports of the Church of England and others beginning to reckon with not only the images of Jesus Christ and God but also of other colonial symbols. Our cathedrals everywhere in the Communion need to have this audit and 'cleansing of the temple'. As our American sisters and brothers say, "Lift every voice and sing" and for an African, song and dance, and symbols and symbolic action are not simply entertainment.

The Rt Rev Dr. James Tengatenga
Distinguished Professor of Global Anglicanism
The School of Theology at the University of the South
Sewanee, Tennessee

Bishop James Tengatenga is a former Chair of the Anglican Consultative Council

Petertide 2020