

# My Personal 50 Year Journey (1970 to 2020) with Orbis Books in Africa

Joseph G. Healey, MM

*That which is good is never finished (Sukuma, Tanzania Proverb)*

**Abstract:** *This reflection treats the author's personal missionary journey in Africa in the context of the 50 Year anniversary (1970 to 2020) of Orbis Books, the Catholic religious publishing house of the Maryknoll Missionary Society. Topics include: the author's four Orbis books; African and Africanists Authors of Orbis Books; other key Orbis Books; the author's participation in the Orbis Books Advisory Committee; the author's friendships with African Orbis Authors; African Conversation Theology: a Distinct Theological Method; and going digital in religious publishing. The reflection concludes with possible themes for Orbis Books on African Christian Theology in the next 50 years (2020 to 2070).*

**Introduction:** I have served in Eastern Africa as a Maryknoll missionary for most of the 50 years life of Orbis Books (1970 to 2020). As we celebrate this Catholic religious publishing house's Golden Jubilee, I can look back and reflect on how my missionary journey has intersected with many Orbis Books on Africa, Orbis authors – both African and Africanists -- and the overall growth of African Christian Theology. I can look forward to the next 50 years (2020 to 2070) of Orbis Books.

From the 1950s to the 1970s one newly ordained priest from each Maryknoll Society Ordination Class at Maryknoll, New York, USA was assigned to study journalism. In 1961 it was Father Miguel d'Escoto, MM. In 1966 it was myself. As a personal anecdote every Maryknoller dreams of going into the Superior General's office and being told, "you are assigned to Japan or Tanzania or Chile." Well, I got my assignment in the laundry room in the basement of the Maryknoll Seminary at Maryknoll, New York in November, 1965. I had just finished throwing my dirty laundry into the washing machine when Father Albert Nevins, MM, the Director of the Social Communications Department of the Maryknoll Society of Priests and Brothers, came by. He said, "Joe you are being assigned to study journalism, Make sure you send in your application to Journalism School by Christmas." And that was that.

So my missionary adventures began.

Now fast forward to 1970. Miguel was the Director of the Social Communications Department of the Maryknoll Society. Together with Philip J. Scharper he founded Orbis Books, the new Maryknoll Catholic Publishing House with headquarters at Maryknoll, New

York, USA. At that time I was the Secretary of the Social Communications Office of AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa)<sup>1</sup> with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya.

In 1970 when I first heard about this new religious publishing house that focuses on mission I was pleased and even excited. I hoped there would be books published about Africa. In those early years we had a different vocabulary. Orbis Books promoted Third World<sup>2</sup> Theology. We wrote about “Developing Countries” and “Emerging Countries.” These terms basically used an economic, material and commercial lens as if this was the only yardstick or criterion. Over the past 50 years this pejorative language has slowly disappeared. Now we say Orbis Books highlights Global South Theology.

## My Four Orbis Books

My first Orbis Book was *A Fifth Gospel: The Experience of African Christian Values*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1981. It is an autobiographical reflection on my life and ministry in Nyabihanga Village in Rulenge Diocese in Western Tanzania. It documents my life and pastoral activities with Bishop Christopher Mwoleka, the bishop of Rulenge Diocese. He was the bishop-founder of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Tanzania and pioneered many innovations in developing a SCCs Model of Church on the grassroots.

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<sup>1</sup> [AMECEA](#) is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011, but the two Sudans remain part of one Episcopal Conference. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members. AMECEA is one of the eight Regional Episcopal Conferences of [SECAM](#) (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar).

<sup>2</sup> The nations of Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia are collectively known as the “Global South” and include 157 recognized states in the world. This term is preferred to the terms “developing countries,” “least developed countries,” “emerging countries,” and the “Third World” that are condescending and pejorative and are usually used in a narrow economic sense. Interestingly, the first reference I saw to “the Christian Churches in the Global South” in 2003 was not in a religious journal or magazine but in a “secular” literary magazine – *The New Yorker*. Related terms are: “economically developing countries;” “economically emerging countries;” “economically developing South;” and “economically underprivileged countries.” The newer language is: “Global South countries” (geographical rather than economic); and “Southern Hemisphere” (geographical belt across Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia). We also try to avoid other stereotype and pejorative descriptions of Africa such as the “dark continent,” “the lost continent” and the “forgotten continent.”

<sup>3</sup> I graduated from Portsmouth Priory High School in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, USA in 1956. To show loyalty and support to me, their alumnus, the Benedictine Monks read this book during meals in their refectory (dining room) -- a Benedictine tradition for hundreds of years.

Fortunately there was a SCM Press, London edition and later Swahili and German versions. Father Ed Farrell, a pastor in Detroit, Michigan and well known spiritual writer in the USA wrote the "Foreword." He said that you can usually find the title of a book somewhere in the text and so I did. My original title was *Africa's Fifth Gospel*, but Orbis put the word Africa in the sub-title.

My inspiration was the Belgian theologian Father Edward Schillebeeckx, OP who states insightfully: "The account of the life of Christians in the world in which they live is a fifth gospel; it also belongs to the heart of Christology."<sup>4</sup> I immediately got into trouble with the title when readers wrongly referred to the book as *The Fifth Gospel*. This is heresy. Over the years I have tried to explain that there are many Fifth Gospels. *Acts of the Apostles* is referred to as "A Fifth Gospel." A pilgrimage to the Holy Land is referred to as "A Fifth Gospel." Our daily lives are "Fifth Gospels."

I feel that the terms "a fifth gospel" or "fifth gospels" is a valuable root metaphor in theologizing today and incorporates the characteristics of a local African narrative theology of inculturation and contextualization. The terms "gospel" and "good news" can be applied to God's own self-revelation through our daily human experiences. In Christianity there is both the normative interpreted biblical revelation and the current, on-going revelation as experienced in African communities and cultures today (as well as in communities and cultures throughout the world). In the debate over the meaning of the term "a fifth gospel," Bishop Patrick Kalilombe, MAfr of Malawi states: "The point is not how many canonical gospels there are, but to highlight the importance of people appropriating the gospel in their own lives and within their cultures and contexts."<sup>5</sup>

After publishing this book, I got a complimentary letter from an expatriate missionary priest in Tanzania belonging to the Missionaries of Africa Society. He said that I described the same missionary and pastoral experiences that he had, but did not think they were important until he read about them in my book.

Like so many books, *A Fifth Gospel* sold well at first. There was a second edition. Then the sales died. Eventually it went out of print. In 2013 my brother Tom Healey said his grandchildren (my grandnieces and grandnephews) don't know about Uncle Joe's early years in Eastern Africa. So he arranged for Orbis Books to publish a Special 32 Years Anniversary Edition printed digitally with the help of Bill Medeot, former Manager of Operations and Finance.

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus As Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Kalilombe as quoted in Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 33.

My second Orbis Book was *Towards an African Narrative Theology* written with Maryknoll Father Donald Sybertz, MM. It was published in 1997 in the Faith and Culture Series (an Orbis Series on Contextualizing Gospel and Church) with a “Foreword” by American theologian Father Robert Schreiter, CPPS. It was originally published in 1996 by the Paulines Publications Africa (Daughters of St. Paul) with a “Foreword” by Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki, the Archbishop of Nairobi.

The book reflects what traditional African proverbs, sayings, stories and songs used in Christian catechetical, liturgical, and ritual contexts reveal about Tanzania, and about all of Africa. It includes appropriations of, and interpretations of, Christianity in Africa. In the “Foreword” Ndingi wrote: "In particular, this book looks at the cultural riches of African Oral Literature such as proverbs, sayings and stories. I hope that these examples and reflections will help African priests, seminarians and other pastoral workers to rediscover their African roots and make connections to their preaching, teaching and evangelization." This has been the dream of Don and myself for many years, but it is slow going. Many young East African priests and seminarians seem less interested in inculturation and don't seem to value their cultural past.

In reviewing the book, a senior theologian in America said that Narrative Theology is a “slippery slope” because he was viewing it from the classic propositional theology lens of Western Theology. Well-known Ugandan theologian Father John Waliggo states:

Our [African] theological style is very concerned with narrative, expressing teachings in story. Our people listen better when you give them a story. This means using local expressions and rituals, linking the gospel to their story. Everything is brought into the story, the animals, the plants, the whole environment. It's a way of doing theology that is almost dead in the West, but it's very biblical.<sup>6</sup>

Sales of the Orbis edition inch along with reprints of 50 copies each time. William Burrows, the Orbis Books Theological Editor, thought that in the early years it was mainly bought by Protestant seminarians. The Paulines Publications Africa edition has done better and is in its 5th Major Reprint. It is required reading in some of our theological courses here in Nairobi.

My third Orbis Book was *Once Upon a Time in Africa: Stories of Wisdom and Joy*, published in 2004. This was a fun book of African stories that I compiled. I sent hundreds of African stories to the Theological Editors Mike Leach and Sue Perry. They spread them out on the floor, and they chose around 80 stories. Sale have been good with over 8,500 copies sold so far. Many of these stories have been posted on our [African Stories Database](#) on our [African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website](#). A few of the stories are in the Orbis Anthologies on “Inspiration,” “Poetry” and “Prayer.”

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<sup>6</sup> John Waliggo in an interview with John Allen, “An African Perspective,” *National Catholic Reporter (NCR)*, 14 July, 2006, *NCR Website*, retrieved on 6 July, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/african-perspective>

Many of these African stories are user friendly – that is, only one-page long. Some people read one story a night. Over the years I have enjoyed hearing which stories touched people the most and which stories have been used in homilies, sermons, classes, various teaching situations, meetings and prayer times. One example is the popular story collected by American priest Father Ted Hayden, SMA called “You’d Better Be Running:”

Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakes up and it knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed.

Every morning a lion wakes up in Africa and it knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death.

It doesn’t matter whether you’re a lion or a gazelle. When the sun comes up, you’d better be running.

I told this story at a meeting in New York. A woman raised her hand and said, “This fits us here in New York City. When I get up in the morning I better be running.”

My fourth Orbis Book was *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment* written with Jeanne Hinton, an English Anglican lay woman. It was published in 2005 with a “Foreword” by Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, the Archbishop of Westminster Archdiocese in London. Jeanne and I had a nice visit with the cardinal at his residence in London. He told us that the varied, prophetic experiences of Small Christian Communities around the world in the book “offer a glimpse of a church endlessly refired by the Holy Spirit, just as it was at the beginning in Jerusalem.”<sup>7</sup>

The Orbis Edition has not sold well in the USA where SCCs are not a pastoral priority. Bernadette Price, the Orbis Associate Publisher, and responsible for Marketing/Sales/Customer Service, has been very gracious and persevering in our many efforts to promote the book – getting good reviews but few sales.

There was a Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi Edition and a Claretian Publications, Bangalore Edition in 2006. Since the SCCs Model of Church is a key pastoral priority in Eastern Africa, the African Edition continues to sell well and is its 3<sup>rd</sup> Major Reprint. The book is used in the course “Small Christian Communities as a New Model of Church in Africa Today” that is a core or required course in several theological institutes in Nairobi. There are now 190,000 SCCs in Eastern Africa (the nine countries of the AMECEA Region) – many meet weekly to reflect on the gospel of the following Sunday and apply it to our daily lives.

There are chapters on each continent: Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa and Asia and Oceania. We like to think that Chapter 23 on “Promoting SCCs via the Internet” was ahead of its time and prepared for the digital world that we live in now. During the present Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown period with no physical meetings allowed in Kenya, we have started Online Small Christian Communities using social platforms on the internet like Zoom, WhatsApp and Skype.

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<sup>7</sup> Cormac Murphy O’Connor, conversation with the two authors, London, England, 2004.

I have incorporated material from my four Orbis Books into a free, online book called [\*Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa\*](#).<sup>8</sup> The book is regularly revised and updated and contains 1,194 pages as of 14 January, 2021 in the Ebooks Section of the [Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website](#). The [Select Annotated Bibliography of Books, Booklets, Articles, Reports, Papers and Printed Materials and Other Resources](#) highlights many Orbis Books. The 27 Online E-Resource Materials on the “On-going Formation and Training of Small Christian Community (SCC) Members” provide many resources for SCC workshops, seminars and meetings.

## **African and Africanists Authors of Orbis Books**

Bernadette Price<sup>9</sup> and Meryl Marcus, Publishing Associate, as a labor of love, put together a *List of African and Africanists Authors of Orbis Books*. It was a momentous, even heroic, task over 50 years that covers 123 Orbis books in a detailed Excel spreadsheet. The names of Africans and Africanists of chapter writers in edited Orbis books could be another 200 people. The Orbis staff surely spoiled us here in Africa. From this list I have compiled a list of key books that have influenced and inspired me personally: for my own spiritual reading, text books and “Select Bibliography” in my classes and workshops; research materials in my talks and writing; books that I have reviewed; and Book Launches and Books Events that I have been involved in. By decade<sup>10</sup> they are:

Marie-France Perrin Jassy, *Basic Communities in the African Churches*, 1973.  
 Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, 1978.  
 Michael Kirwen, *African Widows*, 1979.

Joseph Donders, *Non-Bourgeois Theology: An African Experience of Jesus*, 1985.  
 Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witch Doctor*, 1985.  
 Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*, 1986.  
 Michael Kirwen, *The Missionary and the Diviner*, 1987.  
 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 1989.  
 Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 1989.  
 Lamin Sanneh: *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact of Culture*, 1989.

Kwesi Dickson, *Uncompleted Mission: Christianity and Exclusivism*, 1991.  
 Bosch, David, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, 1991.  
 Robert Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, 1991.  
 Bénédet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 1992.

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<sup>8</sup> Using the “Find” box, there are 135 references to Orbis Books.

<sup>9</sup> I would be hard pressed to count all the email messages between Bernadette and myself over the years – certainly in the hundreds.

<sup>10</sup> In some references I have chosen the original date of publication. In other references I have chosen the date of the revised edition that may have a new “Foreword.”

- Africa Faith and Justice Network (compiled and edited), *The [First] African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, 1996.
- Elochukwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church, Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, 1996.
- Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion*, 1997.
- Diana Hayes and Charles Ndege, *Were You There? Stations of the Cross*, 1999.
- Carretto Carlo, *Letters from the Desert*, 2002.
- Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 2003.
- Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 2004.
- Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 2004.
- Stan Nussbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Transforming Mission*, 2005.
- Mercy Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 2005.
- Frans Wijzen, Peter Henriot and Rodrigo Mejia (eds.), *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, 2005.
- Paul Kollman, *Evangelization of Slaves & Catholic Origins in Eastern Africa*, 2005.
- Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 2008.
- Jean Mark Ela, *African Cry*, 2008.
- McLaughlin, Janice, *Ostriches, Dung Beetles and Other Spiritual Masters: A Book of Wisdom from the Wild*, 2009.
- Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace – the Second Africa Synod*, 2011.
- James Martin, *This Our Exile: A Spiritual Journey with the Refugees of East Africa*, 2011.
- John Sivalon, *God's Mission and Postmodern Culture: The Gift of Uncertainty*, 2012.
- Laurenti Magesa, *What is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 2013.
- Harvey Kwiyani, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West*, 2014.
- Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, 2016.
- Azetsop, Jacquelineau (ed.), *HIV & AIDS in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation*, 2016.
- Teresia Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters*, 2017.
- Wilfred Sumani, *Mothers of Faith: Motherhood in the Christian Tradition*, 2017.
- Emmanuel Katongele, *The Journey of Reconciliation: Groaning for a New Creation in Africa*, 2017.
- Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist*, 2018.
- Stan Chu Ilo, *A Poor and Merciful Church: The Illuminative Ecclesiology of Pope Francis*, 2018.
- John Bosco Rutagengwa, *Love Prevails: One Couple's Story of Faith and Survival in the Rwandan Genocide*, 2019.

It is interesting that in the first 25 years of Orbis Books (1970 to 1995) the authors were almost all expatriate Africanists. Now in the past 25 years (1995 to 2020) most of the authors are Africans.

## Other Key Orbis Books

Then I compiled a second list of key Orbis books from around the world that have influenced and inspired myself, Maryknollers in Africa, African theologians and African readers.

Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 1973.

Joe Holland, and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, 1983.

Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, 1983.

Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 1984.

Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 1985.

Leonardo Boff, *EcclesioGenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, 1986.

O'Halloran, James, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion*, 1996.

Michael Cowan and Bernard Lee, *Conversation, Risk, and Conversion: The Inner & Public Life of Small Christian Communities*, 1997.

Francisco Claver, *Making of a Local Church*, 2008.

Robert Ellsberg (ed.), *Modern Spiritual Masters: Writings on Contemplation and Compassion*, 2008.

Heim, Joseph (ed.), *What They Taught Us: How Maryknoll Missioners Were Evangelized by the Poor*, 2009.

Ernesto Cardinal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 2010.

Claudette LaVerdiere, *On the Threshold of the Future: The Life and Spirituality of Mother Mary Joseph Rogers, Founder of the Maryknoll Sisters*, 2011.

Francis: *On Care for Our Common Home, Laudato Si': The Encyclical of Pope Francis on the Environment*, 2016.

Francis, *The Courage To be Happy: The Pope Speaks to the Youth of the World*, edited by Robert Ellsberg, 2018.

Francis J. Cunningham, *Vesper Time: The Spiritual Practice of Growing Older*, 2019.

Barbara Wall and Massimo Faggioli (eds.), *Pope Francis: A Voice for Mercy, Justice, Love and Care for the Earth*, 2019.

## Orbis Books Advisory Committee

In 2007 I joined the Orbis Books Advisory Committee as a representative of the Maryknoll Africa Region. The last 13 years have been very enjoyable with yearly meetings at Maryknoll, New York and a great deal of networking in between. There is a lot of camaraderie among the members. I value the wisdom and experience of our two Maryknoll Society “elders” in terms of years of service on the committee: Father Jim Kroeger, MM (Philippines) representing Asia and Father Steve Judd, MM (Bolivia) representing Latin America. Over the years the participation of the Superior General of the Maryknoll Society and the President of the Maryknoll Sisters Congregation has been inspirational. I have enjoyed sharing with the lay members such as Kevin Ahern, Betty Ann Donnelly, Ann Carr and Jim Keane very much.

Each year I present a Report of the Africa Region to the Orbis Books Advisory Committee Meeting. In preparing the report I consult widely among Maryknollers in Africa, Orbis authors who are both African and Africanists and other interested people. Often the theme is “Africa

Matters.” It is a two-way street. I can share what we are thinking and writing in Africa and then get valuable feedback and comments from the committee members.

I often mention in my reports that the \$1,000 grants of Orbis books to libraries, theological colleges and formation houses in Africa are very popular and highly appreciated.

Someone called our yearly discussion a theological thinktank. Robert Ellsberg’s preliminary handouts and opening presentation provide an overview of the trends in religious publishing worldwide and Global South Theology.

In January, 2011 Robert Ellsberg came to Nairobi. He facilitated the yearly Maryknoll Society retreat on our Maryknoll founders Bishop James Anthony Walsh, MM and Father Thomas Price, MM. He met Orbis authors for great *palaver* sessions and visited African publishing houses and theological institutes.

Part of my publishing journey has been working closely with African religious publishing houses such as Paulines Publications Africa --Daughters of St. Paul (published many Orbis books) and Acton Publishers (published six Orbis books) in Nairobi. Their directors -- Sister Teresa Marcazzan, DSP and Dr. Jesse Mugambi – have inspired me for many years by their zeal and creativity for religious publishing in Africa. The African Editions of Orbis Books can be printed at one third of the USA price and easily distributed on the local level in African countries.

## **Friendships with African Orbis Authors**

After moving to Nairobi in 2007 and starting to teach at different theological institutes, I got involved in a series of theological meetings coordinated by Father Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ whom we call “Bator” for short. I presented papers on some aspects of Small Christian Communities that were revised and appeared as chapters in three Orbis Books that are cited above. Over these years we have had many Book Events in East Africa, Europe and the United States.

Although most of these Orbis books have not had good sales, they have put African theologians on the map, so to speak. Kenyan lay woman and theologian Teresia Hinga speaks for many African theologians when she writes: “I thank Orbis and the Maryknoll community for what I have referred to elsewhere as their gift of accompaniment that allows African writers to have a place at the table.”<sup>11</sup>

These meetings and events gave me the opportunity to interact with many African and Africanist theologians and friends of African theology listed alphabetically: Anne Arabome, Jacquineau Azetsop, Dick Baker, Paul Bere, Elias Bongmba, Bénézet Bujo, Rachel Butler, Lisa Cahill, Leonard Chiti, John Conway, Kevin Dowling, Mary Getui, Peter Gichure, Jerry Grudzen,

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<sup>11</sup> Teresia Hinga as quoted in Joseph Healey, Creative Ways of Promoting “Africa Matters” -- Part II: 2017 Report of the Africa Region to the Orbis Books Advisory Committee Meeting, 1.

Nontando Hadebe, Peter Henriot, Teresia Hinga, Stan Chu Ilo, Antoine Kambanda, Peter Kanyandago, Emmanuel Katongele, Jim Keane, Jim Keenan, Michael Kirwen, Peter Knox, Paul Kollman, Léo Lushombo, Laurenti Magesa, Teresa Marcazzan, James Martin, John Mbiti, Janice McLaughlin, Rodrigo Mejia, Festo Mkenda, Eligius Mkulima, Odomaro Mubangizi, Jesse Mugambi, Patrick Mwanja, Philomena Mwaura, Joe Ngala, Josée Ngalula, Gerard Nnamunga, Stan Nussbaum, Charles Nyamiti, Jordan Nyenyembe, Nicholas Obiero, Paulinus Odozor, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Teresa Okure, Elias Omondi Opongo, A. E. Orobator, Antonia Oyo, Elisee Rutagambwa, Richard Rwiza, Nicholaus Segeja, Leo Shea, John Sivalon, Diane Stinton, Wilfred Sumani, Ken Thesing, Elochukwu Uzukwu, Brendan Walsh, Bob White and Frans Wijzen.

I mention specifically Laurenti Magesa and Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator who along with Mercy Oduyoye and Lamin Sanneh have been the African theologians who have written the most Orbis books.

Laurenti Magesa is a diocesan priest from Musoma Diocese, Tanzania and has been close friends with Maryknollers all his life. He likes to remind us that he was born in 1946, the year that the Maryknoll Society came to Tanzania. I know his whole family and years ago his father, the well-known catechist Mwalimu Cornelli Magoti, helped me to learn about SCCs in Musoma. Laurenti is always ready to help me when my theologizing gets fuzzy. He has been a big supporter of SCCs and African Narrative Theology especially with the Sukuma people in Tanzania.

Bator is a Jesuit priest from of Benin City Archdiocese, Nigeria. We share two passions – football (soccer) and African proverbs. After I returned to Nairobi from South Africa and the 2010 World Cup, I gave Bator my *vuvuzela* that he still uses to announce the meeting times at Hekima events. I first met Bator when he was a Jesuit seminarian posting African proverbs on the wall of the dining room at Hekima University College. He has the gift to choose the right African proverb for the right occasion or situation. Bator also likes to use my name “the Youth From a Long Time Ago” (*Kijana wa Zamani* in Swahili).

## **African Conversation Theology: A Distinct Theological Method**

Most of the focus of Orbis books on Africa has been on the content of African Christian Theology. But now some important African theologians are developing a distinct theological method or process. African theologians are developing African Conversation Theology, or more specifically African Christian Conversation Theology, as a “New Way of Doing Theology.”

In Africa we prefer the term African *Palaver* Theology, but we realize that the word *palaver* carries a lot of negative baggage in the Western world. For us in Africa, it is both the name of a method or process of theology and the name of a type of content of theology (much like Liberation Theology). Method heavily influences and determines content and vice versa. It is a two-way process that illuminates and enriches African values and Christian values. It is similar to Mango Tree Theology and Storytelling Theology (Narrative Theology).

Bator spearheaded this new method through the Theological Colloquia on Church, Religion and Society in Africa (TCCRS) that took place in Nairobi, Kenya. He describes

this distinctive method or process very clearly in the “Preface” of our book *The Church We Want*. This is African Theology as Conversation, Active Dialog, Intensive or Deeper Listening and Learning from Each Other (described as “listening in conversation”) and Consensus. This new way of doing African Christian Theology is participatory, collaborative, democratic, cross-disciplinary and multigenerational. It involves teamwork and working together.

Bator explains the specifics of this method or process during the first theological colloquium held in Nairobi in March, 2010:

As a condition for participation, contributors submitted their papers in advance. The papers were distributed ahead of the conference to all participants to be read and reflected upon ahead of time.<sup>12</sup> At the conference, each contributor briefly summarized the central thesis of his or her paper, following which a designated respondent presented a critical response.<sup>13</sup> Each paper was then subjected to an intensive discussion by all attendees. The papers were revised based on comments and suggestions received. The final list of chapters in the book represents the fruit of active dialog and intensive listening among theologians and friends. It exemplifies the practice of *palaver* that emphasizes open conversation in community and prioritizes consensus over confrontation.<sup>14</sup>

Ugandan theologian Father Emmanuel Katongole emphasizes that African theologians listen to the real-life stories of the African people. Stories are not just anecdotal. African Storytelling is a way of living, a way of listening, a way of being theologian. Thus, real storytelling is storylistening. Creative listening is deeper than just hearing. It is listening on a deeper level. It internalizes the experience. There is in fact a theology of listening. It includes oral theological conversation and importantly, it honors women’s stories and experiences. Stories give texture to theology. They illustrate the lives

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<sup>12</sup> As a concrete example of this *palaver* or conversation process I wrote a paper on “Small Christian Communities: Promoters of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace in Eastern Africa” for the colloquium/conference on the Second African Synod that took place at Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya in March, 2010. A participant, Father Peter Knox, SJ from South Africa, printed out the draft of my paper ahead of time and wrote very helpful detailed comments that he gave me on the first day. After I presented my paper in a general session, Father Gabriel Mmassi, SJ from Tanzania give a helpful critique response. At the end of the 15 minute discussion on the paper, the recorder, Bator from Nigeria, gave me a printed summary. All this material was very helpful in writing my final draft that appeared in a chapter in the Orbis Book.

<sup>13</sup> This process is very different from many conferences in Rome and other places that begin with a top down approach: a series of magisterial lectures with little time for interaction and open discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: The Second African Synod* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 3.

of people living the theology, preventing theology from being just a series of propositions. This is African Narrative Theology.

The starting point of this kind of African Christian Theology is both context and experience. Many of the newer Orbis books draw on grassroots experiences and practical “on the ground” research. In the spirit of Pope Francis, African theologians try to listen to the cries of the poor, the marginated and those on the peripheries of society. This method draws on the ideas and writings of Bénézet Bujo, Jean-Marc Ela, Emmanuel Katongole, Teresa Okure and Elochukwu Uzukwu (all Orbis authors). Local, contextual theologies can be constructed in Africa with the local communities as “theologians.”

The spirit of the collaborative, collegial and synodal style of our African Conversational Theology is reflected in the well-known Burkina Faso Proverb that is also very popular in Western countries: *If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.*

## **Go Digital or Die**

Going digital has been big step in religious publishing.. Now all Orbis Books are sold online as Ebooks on Amazon and we often hear the mantra *Go Digital or Die*. Of many stories here is one. I went to see Maria Angelini who is the Production Coordinator in the Orbis Books Office at Maryknoll, New York. To me a novice she explained digital publishing through a simple demonstration: on the computer one hand controls the print version and the other hand the Ebook Version and both are published at the same time. I wrote a chapter on “What Catholic Young People Really Want to Talk About?” in Kevin Ahern and Christopher Derige Malano, (eds.), *God’s Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond* that was published in 2018. When I visited Maria in 2019 I had a few updates – two new universities that I had visited and several changes of addresses of contributors. She put the changes in the Ebook version and sent the new updated file to Amazon. Within two days my changes were in Ebook version being sold online on the Amazon Website. For me this was amazing – like magic.

Orbis Books has always encouraged African Publishers to co-publish its books at a lower price that is user friendly for African readers. Now if an African Publisher publishes a book by a Orobator or Magesa, a buyer can order it through Amazon and get a Print on Demand (POD) copy immediately anywhere in the world. This process works both ways: Africa to USA and USA to Africa. Now companies, especially in Kenya and South Africa, can provide Print on Demand (POD) copies of Orbis Books that do not have an African Edition.

For me this is the most exciting development in digital print technology in my 13 years on the Orbis Books Advisory Committee.

## **Orbis Books on African Christian Theology: 2020 to 2070**

What of the next 50 years -- 2020 to 2070? Anyone who looks into a crystal ball will be humbled by asking the question: On 1 January, 2020 could we have predicted what has happened

in the last 12 months? But we can search for the possible trends in African Christian Theology in the next 50 years. What will be distinctive about African Christian Theology in the future? What kind of Orbis Books can we expect in 2020-2070? Some major theological themes/topics/challenges/opportunities (listed alphabetically) could include the following. All the themes are in the context of Christian Theology in Africa:

**Biblical Hermeneutics.**  
**Care of the Earth/Climate Justice/Ecology/Environment.**  
**Child Protection/Child Safeguarding.**  
**Covid-19 Pandemic.**  
**Cultural Patriarchy.**  
**Family Trafficking.**  
**Digital World.**  
**Ecclesial Church.**  
**Ethnicity (Tribalism/Racism).**  
**Eucharistic Famine.**  
**Gap between Young People and the Institutional Church.**  
**Gender.**  
**Globalization.**  
**Governance in the Catholic Church.**  
**Health Care Ministry.**  
**HIV/AIDS.**  
**Identity of the Catholic Church.**  
**Inculturation.**  
**Interreligious Dialog.**  
**Life.<sup>15</sup>**  
**Liturgy and Forms of Liturgical Celebration.**  
**Marginated and Those on the Peripheries of Society.**  
**Married Priests.**  
**Narrative.**  
**Palaver<sup>16</sup>/Conversation.**

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<sup>15</sup> In a 2016 interview the then Superior General of the Jesuits Father Adolfo Nicolas, SJ commented on Jesus' words "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life:" Asia is the Way; Europe and the United States are preoccupied with the Truth; Africa and Latin America are Life – they keep alive values (friendship, family, children, etc.) which we've forgotten in other parts of the world." This is a great insight for us in Africa as Laurenti Magesa has written consistently about "life" being at the center of African theology/values, etc. We can go back to Placide Tempels' classic book on "life force." See "An Interview with Fr. Adolfo Nicolás," La Civiltà Cattolica Website, retrieved on 6 July, 2020, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/an-interview-with-fr-adolfo-nicolas/> See also Festo Mkenda, Michael Amaladoss, Gerald J. Hughes, Laurenti Magesa and Diane B. Stinton, *The Way, the Truth and the Life: A Confluence of Asia, Europe and Africa in Jesus of Nazareth* (Nairobi: JHIA, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> A book to appear in 2021 or 2022 is *African Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Call to Palaver* edited by Elias Opongo and Paul Bere. It is a "Tribute" to Laurenti Magesa who has made a tremendous contribution to Africa Theology for more than 40 years.

**Pentecostal Christianity.**  
**Political Leadership.**  
**Pope Francis Effect.**  
**Poverty.**  
**Prosperity Gospel.**  
**Reconfiguring/Repositioning/Redefining Ministry in the Catholic Church.**  
**Reform of the Seminary Training.**  
**Refugees and Migrants.**  
**Sexual Abuse.**  
**Small Christian Communities Model of Church.**  
**Social Transformation.**  
**Speak the Truth to Power.**  
**Structures of the Catholic Church.**  
**Synodality/Synodal Church.**  
**Ubuntu.**  
**Violence.**  
**Women Deacons.**

## **Conclusion: The Way Forward**

As Orbis Books finishes its first 50 years in Africa (1970 to 2020) and begins a new 50 year journey (2020 to 2070), perhaps a good metaphor can be found in the moving prayer of Dag Hammarskjöld: “For all that has been, THANKS. For all that will be, YES.” Let us respond to Pope Francis’s challenge in No. 33 of *The Joy of the Gospel*: “I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.” As we research and write new African Christian Theology, let us listen deeply to “what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (*Revelation 2:7*) and read and respond to the signs of the times in Africa in the light of gospel. In the spirit of mission, I end with a Ganda (Uganda) Proverb: *One who sees something good, must narrate it.*”

## **Bibliography**

**NOTE:** Due to the unique nature of this article, all the books cited are Orbis Books and are listed in the main text by author, title and date of publication.

### **Main Websites and Internet Resources**

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<https://www.afriprov.org>

AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa) Website  
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Rev. Joseph G. Healey, MM  
Maryknoll Society  
P.O. Box 43058  
00100 Nairobi, Kenya

254-0723-362-993 (Safaricom, Kenya)  
+ 1 973-216-4997 (AT&T, USA)  
Email: [JGHealey@aol.com](mailto:JGHealey@aol.com)  
WhatsApp: 1+ 973-216-4997  
Skype: joseph-healey