



From the Editor

Thinking with Africa

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ABSTRACT

Africa is not only a geographical region but an idea which Westerners, including modern Anglicans, have used ‘to think with’. This includes how accounts of recent Christian growth and decline used by Westerners and Africans alike, and which may require nuance in themselves, have been used questionably in debates about other issues. The real diversity of African Anglican thought and experience offers more complex and enriching possibilities, and should be engaged more directly and fully.

KEYWORDS: Africa, Anglican Communion, Augustine of Hippo, Daniel Muñoz, Pliny the Elder

‘...vulgare graeciae dictum semper aliquid novi Africam adferre’
(Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 8.17.42).

Out of Africa

Europeans have been pondering Africa for a long time, in some consistent if problematic ways. Pliny’s dictum that Africa is ‘always producing something new’ itself refers to an older Greek saying (or at least to something Aristotle had said), and was not just an identification of Africa with the new and exotic, but an observation about the strangeness of its wildlife in particular. Such a combination of exoticism with a romanticism connected with nature opposed to

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culture still haunts discourse about Africa across Western thought and beyond, and can be evident in the way Africa is thought of, or with, in contemporary Anglicanism.

The Africa of which Pliny spoke was different from the region to which the term now refers. Roman 'Africa' was not a continent, but a quite specific region around Rome's old nemesis of Carthage, that included parts of modern Algeria, Tunisia and Western Libya; go far enough west or east, to modern Morocco or towards Egypt, and 'Africa' was no longer at issue. Something similar can be said of 'Asia', of course; both were originally terms applied to Mediterranean regions at some great distance from the Roman heartland. As Western knowledge and interest expanded both south and east, 'Africa' and 'Asia' shifted in literal meaning but still designated what was on the margins, in some measure both fascinating and disturbing, and available for literal as well as conceptual exploitation. Although 'Africa' now means a continent that includes the original referent (Asia doing so barely, or only formally), the stability of 'Africa' in Western thought is less about physical geography than about being a foil or counterpoint – not always disparaged, but certainly fused with the exotic and romantic traits already mentioned – to the West's own sense of itself as the social and cultural, as well as geographical, center of all.²

This exoticism, established in the ancient world, remained the premise of encounter with Africa much more recently during what was both the 'colonial' and the 'missionary' period, which descriptions can be seen either as two aspects of objectification and subjugation, or more sympathetically as a contradictory exercise in simultaneous subjugation and salvation. The nexus between these, and particularly of the Anglican expansion into Africa and of the slave trade, may be universally regretted, but is so far only patchily understood or acknowledged.³

Anglicans and Africa

Africa now has a significance for Anglicans like no other continent, for at least two reasons and perhaps more. First, the scale of African Anglicanism is remarkable, and the growth of African Christianity generally is often contrasted with the undoubted decline of the

2. Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

3. One important recent exception explores the role of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in slavery: Travis Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Churches of the West.⁴ Second, statements and actions of some leaders of African Churches have been prominent in the tensions that have characterized the Communion in recent decades, and treated by both liberal and conservative forces elsewhere as basic to attempts to halt developments involving same-sex marriage and ordination of gay and lesbian clergy.⁵

There are good reasons both to qualify this picture and to question the way it is used by Anglicans, in different places and of varied theological opinion, in their reflections and debates over the life and mission of the Communion. Africa is neither a homogenous reality, nor a mere object or instrument for commentators to use as a stick to beat others with. If Africa now has a unique sort of prominence in the life of the Communion, it may mean something more than, or other than, what has so far been widely assumed or claimed.

In a recent essay published in this journal, Spanish scholar Daniel Muñoz pointed to the difficulties experienced across national Churches, including but hardly limited to those in Africa, in reckoning their own numbers.⁶ Churches such as those of Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, all seem to experience a significant difference between number of claimed adherents and active or committed membership. While they may claim very many adherents, those who actively participate in the life and mission of the Church – and who would thus embody claims about the vigor and seriousness of the faith in those countries – may actually be far fewer in number.

On the other hand, the North American (and some of the quite different Asian) Churches share a tendency for the two sets to be much closer; the apparently small US Episcopal Church and even some quite tiny Asian Churches are not quite so small, relatively speaking, when concrete measures such as attendance are considered. This might also apply of course to African members of the Communion with different histories of the relation between Church and colonial authority, and different resultant patterns of nominal versus committed adherents.⁷

4. See, notably, Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Rise of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

5. Miranda K. Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopal Dissidents and their African Allies Are Reshaping Anglicanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

6. Daniel Muñoz, 'North to South: A Reappraisal of Anglican Communion Membership Figures', *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 14.1 (2016), pp. 71-95.

7. The value of Muñoz's extrapolation of 'African Average Church Attendance' ('North to South', p. 87) while based on three significant Churches, may be limited by the common history of the three as British colonies.

Absolute size is not the only issue where generalization and caricature may be dangers. In Kenya, Muñoz suggests, there is reason to suspect that Anglicanism is experiencing a decline, along with other mainstream Protestant groups.⁸ This would contrast with the widespread assumption that Anglican Churches in Africa or in the so-called Global South all have one basic experience, of vitality and growth, or that secularization and related phenomena could have no real impact in Africa (or exist only as 'Western influences').

Numbers in Western countries also offer more complex pictures, when viewed with more care, as Muñoz points out. The narratives of European and American decline, irrefutable at one level, have to be qualified with more careful observations about where growth and decline are taking place.

Outside Africa, liberals and conservatives are both at fault in wanting to conjure an Africa that suits their own presuppositions. Muñoz's work offers a clearer implicit critique of conservative idealization (could one say lionization?) of African faith and spirituality, applied to numbers. Yet the racism embedded in some liberal responses to real or perceived positions taken by African Anglicans, attempting to give what they see as faithful witness in recent conflicts in the Communion, has been all too evident.

More benign phenomena, like the application of the term 'the [sic] African Bible Study method' to popular forms of inductive study, reflect a desire on the part of Western Christians to learn from Africans, or at least from a sort of Africa that suits their needs. Even this nomenclature, however, reflects the old problem: a persistent tendency to imagine Africa as a single and simple whole, whose character represents the antithesis of all that is Western. Africans, in this view, must surely all have one method of Bible study, which will be inductive rather than analytical, since the West obviously has the latter.⁹ This caricature, however, stands in contrast to what can readily be discovered about actual Bible study, as well as critical engagement with such study, undertaken by specific Africans.¹⁰

8. Muñoz, 'North to South', pp. 75-76.

9. On the other hand, the discussion of the origins of this method in Frank Wade, *Transforming Scripture* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), reflects contests even over the 'real' origins of the one method. Africa would then be left with just part of one way of reading the Bible (see pp. 86-87).

10. Gerald West, '(Southern) African Anglican Biblical Interpretation: A Postcolonial Project', *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 8.2 (2010), pp. 140-64.

Thinking with Africa

Claude Lévi-Strauss famously said with regard to totemism that animals were chosen as identifiers, not because good to eat but 'good to think with', or perhaps more literally just 'good to think'.¹¹ The difference between the two translations is a matter of nuance when it comes to following Lévi-Strauss's account of symbolic thought and practice, but bears a little more thought in this context.

Western Anglicans, like others, have tended to 'think with Africa' in an instrumental sense; to use the idea of Africa as something useful for reflecting on issues and ideas that are not, or not necessarily, those of Africa or of Africans themselves. At its worst, this tendency to think by means of Africa has become the premise for a sort of proxy war for Western Anglicans, with competing theological and political forces using African voices and structures as means to contend over issues not really, or not necessarily, those of deepest concern to Africans themselves.¹²

Even the widely accepted term 'Global South' of course reflects a US-centric perspective – the mere phrase reflects the need to qualify a North-South divide other than the North American one – and resonates ominously as an extension of a still-problematic relationship, and as a binary opposition that occludes complexity and makes such a 'South' available as another instrument for others to think with, rather than as a complex set of communities.

As much as a post-colonial shift may be acknowledged as necessary and overdue, the tendency to treat Africa in particular as object or instrument persists. It is not actually much progress to move, say, from disparagement of supposed savagery to romanticizing an imagined faith unsullied by the ambiguities of postmodernity, if both positions are merely substitutes for real experience and conversation. While there is no doubt that the absolute numbers of African (and other) Anglicans add to the necessity of a radical rethinking of the traditional Eurocentric human geography of Anglicanism, to substitute Lagos for Lambeth as a sort of moral center is neither persuasive nor helpful.

A post-colonial engagement with Africa may still have to 'use' rather than simply avoid the idea of Africa, because it is too significant a

11. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (trans. Rodney Needham; Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 89. The original phrase was 'bonne à penser'.

12. Miranda K. Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis*; Jason Bruner, 'Divided We Stand: North American Evangelicals and the Crisis in the Anglican Communion', *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 8.1 (2010), pp. 101-25.

construct merely to wave away, but must constantly interrogate and qualify it. And such engagement, in academic discourse as in wider ecclesial life, must be a conversation in which African Anglican voices, even in their diversity, set the terms of conversation. African Anglicans must be acknowledged by others as 'good to think with', in the sense that English allows beyond Lévi-Strauss's intention; that is, they are not merely instruments of others' thought, but necessary co-thinkers and co-theologians in an Anglican world as otherwise, and whose diverse perspectives have the capacity to be far more enriching and challenging for others than the constructs into which they have typically been placed.

African Voices

This edition of the *Journal* includes a number of such thinkers, from different parts of the African continent, employing different methods and with distinct voices.¹³ Beverly Haddad's article, which is historically and sociologically focused, amounts to a postcolonial case study that explores an intriguing clash of symbols in the work of the Mothers' Union in South Africa in the 1950s.¹⁴ Bishop Maimbo Mdolwa addresses a similar period in East Africa, in providing close attention to the role that Anglicans, both missionaries and locals, played in the events leading to the formation of Tanzania.¹⁵

Henry Mbaya provides a constructive theology of episcopal leadership in the light of Central African culture and language and the experience of the Church in Malawi.¹⁶ Victor Atta-Baffoe, a West African bishop and theologian, speaks not of but from African experience in offering his theological perspective on the Anglican Communion itself.¹⁷ He draws on New Testament vocabulary and understandings, correlating them with African emphasis on community, but providing a global rather than merely local vision. Returning to South Africa,

13. A number of these articles and the effort to gather such a group arise from work done by regional associate editor Janet Trisk and founding editor Bruce Kaye, to whom warm thanks are extended by the present editor.

14. 'Church Uniforms as an Indigenous Form of Anglicanism: A South African Case Study', in this issue.

15. 'Anglicanism, *Uhuru* and *Ujamaa*: Anglicans in Tanzania and the Movement for Independence', in this issue.

16. 'Church as *Mbumba* and Bishop as *Nkhoswe*: Anglican Ecclesiology and Missiological Imperatives in Central Africa', in this issue.

17. 'Living in Communion within Anglicanism'.

Jonathan May provides theological analysis of recent power struggles in ecclesial settings.¹⁸

These studies make their significant and diverse contributions to study not only of African Anglicanism, or Anglicanisms, but offer considerable food for thought about issues that are more than local: episcopal leadership, the nature of communion, and the so far half-grasped postcolonial challenge which is manifest in different ways in all these essays. And it may be worth noting that while there is mention of some of the issues popularly connected with African perspectives in contentious Anglican debates, these issues are not uppermost here.

The Abiding Success of African Christianity

Underlying some of the debates about the size and success of African Christianity is the assumption that numerical and material success actually point to something ultimately important, such as faithfulness or the presence of the Spirit. Such claims are really not far from those of prosperity theologians who seem to be universally (and properly) condemned by Anglicans of whatever stripe. It is, however, from Africa that the most abiding critique of this view came, a millennium-and-a-half ago, and which continues to be the response of anything close to orthodox Christianity to the shifting sands of numerical success and apparent historic fortune.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is one of the greatest theologians from any time and place, and was of course a native of Africa. His contributions to Christian theology are many, but none is more significant than his account of history itself, in the great *City of God*, written across the period from 412 to 426, and in part a response to the disastrous sack of Rome, by this time not merely the center of the Empire but the resting place of Peter and Paul and the embodiment of Christian success and divine favor. Augustine's great contribution was to underline the ambiguity of history, as it can be known or perceived; while blessings can be celebrated, divine purpose cannot be aligned with the apparent success or failure of human institutions, even of the Church. The City of God is a pilgrim people, related to the institutions and communities we see but not identical with them. Only a final and divine view of history can reveal its true meaning.

18. 'For Such a Time as This: Conflict, Community and the Courts in the South African Church'.

The significance of Augustine's argument lies not just in the fact or content of his *magnum opus Africanum*, but in the history that engulfed the thriving Christian communities of Africa soon after his death. Were his own success to be assessed by the metrics of growth and decline, Augustine would be cast on the scrap heap of ecclesial failure. In fact he and those ancient Christians who once prayed and worked in what is now Algeria are regarded by Anglicans as fellow-inheritors of the Kingdom of God. It is not, then, any statistical measure that really makes them or modern African Anglican Christians worth studying, or learning from; it is their capacity to be faithful collaborators in the curious and diverse reality of the Church, and of the Anglican Communion.