

AFRICAN PANEL AND DISCUSSION—SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: Identity and Difference; Unity and Fragmentation:  
African Panel and Discussion
- Convener: Emmanuel Katongole, University of Notre Dame
- Moderator: Cyril Orji, University of Dayton
- Panelists: Elochukwu Uzukwu, Duquesne University.  
Teresia Mbari Hinga, Santa Clara University.  
Emmanuel Katongole, University of Notre Dame.

The selected session explored the convention's theme of identity and difference, unity and fragmentation in relation to Africa. A number of recent developments make the theme of particular relevance and urgency to the Catholic Church in Africa. The rapid growth not only of Catholicism on the continent, but of other Christian denominations (mostly Evangelical & Pentecostal) as well as of Islam and Indigenous forms of religious expression makes Africa not only a vibrant and religiously diverse continent, but creates numerous possibilities as well challenges for the church in Africa. Other factors, which include, globalization, mass urbanization, rapid population growth, rising economic prospects often going hand in hand with a widening gap between rich and poor, entrenched forms of dictatorship, civil war in many countries, and fundamentalisms of various kinds that exploit religious, ethnic, gender, or national identities in a way that threatens peace and stability in Africa. In its design, the goal of the session was to shed light on this changing landscape, to identify key theological and ecclesial challenges arising out of that context, and suggest *theological* resources and methods through which Catholicism in Africa can respond to those challenges, thereby nurturing a sense of communion and identity that not only reflects a true sense of God's family but fosters peaceful coexistence in a richly diverse and increasingly fragmented continent.

The panel discussion was kicked off with Elochukwu Uzukwu's presentation on "Religions of Africa and the Labor of Ecumenism." Uzukwu offered a historical overview of Africa as a religiously diverse continent that is home to a host of religious traditions including African tradition religions, various Christian and Muslim traditions as well as some Hindu and Buddhist traditions. In his analysis, Uzukwu noted that what made the peaceful coexistence of religions in Africa historically possible was the primal hospitality and openness of Africa's traditional religions to other religions, including Islam and Christianity as they made their way into Africa. According to Uzukwu, the challenge of religious intolerance that is on the rise in Africa is in great part due to the claims for exclusive truth and loyalty, which have become radicalized by Christian and Muslim fundamentalists. If the trend of religious intolerance in Africa is to be checked, Christianity and Islam need to learn from African traditional religions and reclaim hospitality and openness to other traditions as a mark of genuine religion and the basis of a true spirit of ecumenism and peaceful coexistence.

In her presentation, Teresia Hinga explored the many forces of globalization that use, manipulate, and radicalize religious sentiment to further personal, economic and political goals. Citing the example of the recent anti-gay legislation in Uganda (and Nigeria), she pointed to economic, political and ideological forces behind such

legislation. Over and beyond these forces she also noted the perceived erosion of African culture in the wake of the forces of globalization that tends to be exploited. African women often find themselves in the crossfires of this cultural war and often find themselves without many resources as they try to negotiate some of the oppressive aspects of African traditional culture and the false promises of post-modern liberation.

Katongole's paper, "Rethinking Ethnicity within African Politics," explored recent events in Africa's social political history—the 20th anniversary of the Rwanda Genocide, the civil war in South Sudan, the fighting in Central African Republic—as a confirmation of the ongoing challenge of ethnicity within African politics. These events are not an exception, Katongole argued, but an indication of how deep the imagination of difference and ethnicity is inscribed within the political imagination of Africa. Christianity and Christian theology have not offered much relief as it tended to assume "ethnicity" as a basic building block for African identity. He offered a theological framework within which he suggested ethnicity as a starting point in the journey towards a Christian identity, whose telos is the realization of Ephesian Moments (Andrew Walls) in Africa. He pointed to initiatives like the Holy Trinity Peace Village (Kuron, South Sudan), Maggy Barankitse's maison shalom (Burundi), and the Interdenominational Peace initiative in Central African Republic as such Ephesian Moments.

The session was ably moderated by Cyril Orji, who limited the panelists' presentation to fifteen minutes each so as to allow ample time for a general discussion. The animated discussion centered around key issues like the relation (and difference) between African tradition religions and Christianity and Islam, the growing presence of radical and fundamentalist ideology in Africa, the role of culture in mediating difference, and the ambivalent role of ethnicity in Africa—both a blessing and a challenge. The session realized a major objective of generating (at the CTSA) a lively conversation about Catholicism that many participants recommended a selected session at next year's convention to explore the theme of *sensus fidelium* in relation to the African continent.

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