

Stop Harassing the Gentiles:
Reflection on African Theology, 1998-2002
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Foreword

by Rev. dr. Jonas N. Dah.

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The Reverend Hinne Wagenaar came to our Seminary in 1998 full of zeal to introduce a course in African Theology if that was not yet existing. Before his arrival two colleagues on the staff were already discussing the matter. The course had not yet been structured. He won the sympathy of the Senate to offer this subject. These articles give an idea of some of the themes that he handled within these past four years.

On the 12th October 2000 in a staff colloquium, Wagenaar presented one of the articles in this collection titled: *Theology, Identity and the pre-Christian Past*. After critically analysing Dr. Kwame Bediako's theological paradigm in which Christians 'can be authentic Africans and true Christians', he applied this to European history of mission, specifically to his native Friesland. In it he contends that his own tradition had been the victim of a mission approach that was not different from what Africans went through during the stages of Christian expansion on that continent. To an African's surprise, Wagenaar admits that he has learnt something from Africans doing theology that is useful for his reflections on his Frisian Christian identity.

Reverend Wagenaar is very convinced that Acts 15 is central to African Theology. In his article *Stop harassing the Gentiles*, after personal exegesis of the passage, he draws the conclusion that applying the spirit of the Jerusalem Council to Africa would mean that Africans do not need to replace their cultural and religious identities with European ethnocentric traditions to become Christians. He supports fully Lamin Sanneh's concept of 'mission as translation' as opposed to 'mission by diffusion'. On the other hand, Wagenaar expresses disappointment at Sanneh for paying less attention to exegesis and Biblical material in developing his concept of 'mission by translation'. This frustration pushes him to look closely at Genesis 11:1-9. In his article *Babel, Jerusalem and ... Kumba*, he comes to one of the conclusions that 'diversity in language, and thus culture, is given in order that people may feel free and develop themselves according to their own dreams'. Seen from this perspective Wagenaar believes that the Babel myth of diverse languages can no longer be treated exclusively as punishment on human pride.

The language issue called for a second article: *Church and Language*. Cameroon has 326 languages spoken by about sixteen million people. French and English remain the official legal languages. This reminds Wagenaar of Dutch that was treated in the Netherlands as ‘the language’ while his Frisian mother tongue came second. It is more disturbing for him that such colonial languages are even promulgated by the church. He protests against this state of affairs by saying that ‘we are not universal people. We are born and bred in a specific context with its own customs, traditions and languages... It is very possible to be very particular about our own identities and be perfectly in harmony with other people being different’.

These are some of the themes that the reader is called upon to read in detail. Not everybody will agree with Wagenaar in his exegetical and hermeneutical approaches to the scriptural passages which he has treated. His disagreement here and there with ‘seasoned exegetes’ shows that there is not only one way of looking at a text especially when this is done in different cultural contexts. The reflections in these articles are rich, provocative and challenging to all who are interested in African Theology and those who are fighting for the decolonization of Christianity anywhere around the globe.

Jonas N. Dah

Preface

In the year 1997 I was requested, by the Board of Mission of the Netherlands Reformed Church, to become a lecturer in Systematic Theology at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kumba. After due consideration my wife and I decided to wholeheartedly accept this offer and were consequently called by the Synod of our Church for this ministry. In February 1998 we started our preparatory course at the “Hendrik Kraemer Institute” (HKI) in the Mission House in Oegstgeest, and we left for Cameroon in July 1998.

During my studies at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands) and at Union Theological Seminary in New York City (USA) I had specialized in the fields of Ecumenical Theology, Missiology and ‘Third World’ Theology. Prof. Dr. Bert Hoedemaker initiated me in these fields of study and guided me throughout my studies and after. Prof. Dr. James Cone challenged me to

enter more intensively into the fields of Black Theology and ‘Third World’ Theology. In this latter field my interest was firstly sparked by Latin American Liberation Theology. Later I was challenged by Asian Theology and, finally, towards the end of my studies, I learned to appreciate African Theology.

My interest in African Theology was deepened during the years of my first ministry of being a chaplain to international students in the Netherlands (1990-1997) when I met many African students on a daily basis. In that capacity I was able to travel twice quite extensively through Africa (Ghana and Burkina Faso, 1993; Ethiopia and Eritrea, 1995) and read widely both African literature and African Theology.

During the preparatory course at the HKI, I took the chance to read the works of Dr. Kwame Bediako from Ghana, and wrote the article *Theology, Identity and the pre-Christian Past* with the subtitle ‘A critical analysis of Kwame Bediako’s theology from a Frisian perspective’. I remember that people in the Mission House laughed at me and advised me to skip the Frisian perspective. They did not understand that, to me, reading African Theology was not simply an academic matter, but an existential exercise very much related to my own Frisian cultural background. African theologians asked questions which had never been asked in the Christian context of the Frisian people. Today, as in that first article, my involvement in African Theology is intrinsically related to my own context.

The article was eventually published in the *International Review of Mission* (IRM, the mission journal of the World Council of Churches). It was noticed by Rev. Ype Schaaf, a Frisian colleague who worked as a missionary in Cameroon in the 1960s, who proposed the plan to write a booklet on this subject in our own Frisian language. The result was a booklet with the title *Our own theology? Frisian and Saxon answers to African questions*. The booklet was translated into Dutch and an English translation is forthcoming.¹ The 6th article on ‘Church and Language’ in the present volume is a translation of an article written for the original booklet in Frisian.

The first four articles are the result of my courses at PTS and all relate Biblical hermeneutics to African Theology and Missiology. The second article, *Babel, Jerusalem and ... Kumba* was originally written for the 50th anniversary of the Seminary, but was published first in

¹ H. Wagenaar, Y. Schaaf en A. van der Meiden, *In eigen teology?: Afrikaanse fragen yn it Frysk en yn it Saksysk* (KFFB, 1999) Dutch translation: *Een eigen theologie: Friese en Saksische antwoorden op Afrikaanse vragen* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 2000)

the IRM. The remaining 3 articles were all written during the last semester of my stay at the Seminary (2nd semester 2001-2002). *Stop harassing the Gentiles* is an expression of my attachment to the ‘inculturation stream’, while *White as Snow* and *It shall not be taken away from Her* show my engagement with the ‘liberation stream’ in African Theology (Black Theology and Feminist Theology respectively).

I want to thank Dr. Jaap Breetvelt, formerly the Africa Secretary for the Board of Mission of the Netherlands Reformed Church, while today Secretary for the Africa and Middle East desk of the Uniting Protestant Churches in the Netherlands, for his support throughout our stay in Cameroon and for sponsoring this publication. I am indebted to my students at PTS who made teaching a joy and who continuously showed their great interest in African Theology, even when taught by a ‘white man’. I am grateful for the friendship and collegiality of my colleagues at PTS, especially to Rev. Dr. Peter Ensor who improved the English in these articles considerably.²

Finally, I want to express love for my wife, Sietske Visser, and our 3 sons: Jornt Wigle, Leon Babatunde and Jonas Teun. As they left for the Netherlands already in December 2001, I have become increasingly aware that life together with them is an indispensable source of joy, warmth and brightness.

Hinne Wagenaar

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² I have used the NIV translation of the English Bible, unless indicated otherwise,