

WHEN THE BULL STOPS BELLOWING: HOPE FOR AFRICAN THEOLOGIANS AND EDUCATORS OF THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN AFRICA

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The proverbial world that is a village has never rung truer than it does in this, the twenty-first century. Technology has made possible the dissemination of information and ideas at a very rapid rate to a vast number of people and to a great number of countries. As a result, a vast array of information is readily at hand and has, sort of, joined the world together even though it is still divided by national borders and oceans.

The Church of the Nazarene has not been exempt from this phenomenon. We are all aware of the extent to which globalization has affected our lives; whether we admit it or not. It is, however, our response to globalization as theologians and educators of the Church that is of cardinal importance, and that has occasioned this essay. Globalization tends to swallow the weak and timid, drowning their voices until, too tired of not being heard, they fall silent and follow the direction of the powerful. This phenomenon is evident all over the world and African theologians and educators risk falling into the same trap. We are like bulls; strong, courageous and filled with the same power of the God who saves all mankind. Yet we are falling silent because we perceive that we are not heard. The African bulls of the Church of the Nazarene dare not stop bellowing because if we do, hope in our contribution to the theology of Holiness will slowly fade. The aim of this essay is to encourage theologians and educators to contribute to theological debates in the Church of the Nazarene, as well as to share insights into theological education from an African perspective.

I believe that globalization has impacted the way we do theology and education in the Church in at least three ways. (1) It is now "easier" to communicate with theologians and educators across continents via electronic mail. This enables greater familiarity among all concerned and creates a greater awareness of the conditions (social, economic, and political) under which we all find ourselves. (2) There is the possibility of a uniform level of instruction that could be maintained on a global scale. This would enable students and faculty from different world areas of the Church to transfer and study anywhere else, bearing in mind, of course, the monetary expenses involved in such an exercise. (3) Of major importance is the potential that exists for mutual sharing of information and, specifically, ideas that could contribute significantly to the soundness of holiness theology and the effectiveness of education done by the Church of the Nazarene as a global role-player.

The Church of the Nazarene, with its broadest base of theologians and educational structures and support being in the United States, has the responsibility of sharing, as it is able to, with those who have fewer resources and who would, undoubtedly, benefit from such sharing. However, it is at this point where a plea for caution and consideration would be in order. I once attended a conference of South African theologians where the speaker related the following story: He started by relating an old South African saying that declares, "education does not bite". This saying serves as an encouragement to young people not to be afraid to learn, as education can only benefit those who have it. However, he wondered why the saying should be stated in this way. Does education bite, and how would it do so? It was only when he was much older, and educated himself, that he finally grasped the meaning of the old saying. Education does bite in the sense that it has the potential to make those who have the privilege of possessing it, arrogant and haughty. The plea is from my heart and I sincerely hope that it would not be construed as presumptuous or arrogant; that is not the intent. I will start by saying that I am of the firm conviction that there are no hierarchies as far as human life is concerned. But, the fact that the Church of the Nazarene's resources are in the United States, opens the door to conceptions that only the US has something to contribute as far as theology education is concerned, and in that sense, "education will bite". We will feel dwarfed and be tempted to fall silent. Now, it is true – and acknowledged – that the US constituent of the Church has, for many years, provided resources of all kinds to other world areas, and we are grateful. But, it is time that we as Africans begin to contribute. I am not contending that we have *never* contributed; I am suggesting that we work *proactively and together with* our US, English, Australian, Philippine, Korean and European

counterparts. Every group, irrespective of their origin in the world, must make use of every opportunity to make valid contributions to the process of education in the global village of the Church of the Nazarene.

Here is the dilemma: I would love to contribute to this process; but I am African. It is not an apology; I am *proud* to be African. The problem, however, is that to the uninitiated, "Africa" conjures up images of wild animals and people parading around dressed in skins. When they are not killing each other in civil wars, they are dying of starvation or AIDS. When not being drowned by floods, they are fried by a merciless sun, beating on them, from "wide African skies". They live in mud huts and travel on the backs of elephants or on ox carts. I can go on and on about what Africans are perceived to be but I think the picture is clear. The truth of the matter is that because of these perceptions we are tempted to believe that our worthiness as humans is diminished. And when this happens we fall ever so silent until our mighty voices are no longer heard. The fact that we are African does not mean that we have nothing to contribute to the rest of the world – even if all of us *did* live in mud huts.

Let us bellow loudly; we are just now starting on the difficult journey of reclaiming our identity and selling ourselves to the world. Those who are familiar with the South African president Mr Thabo Mbeki's "African Renaissance" initiative will know what is being referred to here. The "Renaissance" is criticized as an orchestrated initiative, and can therefore not be a true revival such as that which occurred spontaneously in Europe during the 14th – 16th centuries. That may be true, but for Africans it becomes a *conscious* effort at returning, at least in some way, to the glory of our ancestors in Egypt and Ethiopia. We do not know exactly what happened between then and now but admit that we have a long way to becoming what we once were. We therefore ask you as African theologians and educators in the Church of the Nazarene to raise your voices and bellow. The baggage we bring along with us is heavy – we *expect* that our views will be considered primitive or inferior but let us bellow anyway.

Coupled with our emerging identity is our resolve to operate in our own right as Africans. We make no bones about the fact that we view our world through uniquely African eyes; our ideas are uniquely African, and our problems are uniquely African. What this means is that we all construct our realities differently, and African uniqueness is not necessarily irrelevant to global issues. It is important, therefore, that we see and report on our world from *our* perspective and not be forced into imitating Europe or America. When doing theology and educating, one always starts from where one is, with the result that what may be totally irrational to one, may be completely rational to another – it depends on the context. The problems of AIDS and poverty are part of the African context. Starting where one is means that God has to be made relevant to people who are suffering as a result of these problems, and that, in dealing with these and a host of other issues, there can be no denial of the realities. So, when we do theology and address what to others may appear irrational or "silly questions", it may be that we are just being African. Bellow for all you're worth.

We are Christian *and* African. Let us be proudly so in doing theology and educating. For when the bull stops bellowing the silence is deafening and our hope for a truly relevant African Church of the Nazarene fades into the shadows.

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