



LOGOS AND COSMOS INITIATIVE

A LISTENING EAR TO THE UNIVERSITY: THE JOURNEYS OF THE CATALYSTS OF THE LOGOS AND COSMOS INITIATIVE IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

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CONCLUSION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF FRANCOPHONE AFRICA TO THE GLOBAL CONVERSATION ON SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY

ROLAND CUBAHIRO

TRANSLATED BY DEEPL AND YADIRA COLIN

Reflecting on the conclusion of this book, it seems to me that if you, the reader, have come this far, it is precisely because you have enjoyed the content and now wish to bring this reading to a close. This book provides a rich and varied journey through a subject that is paramount for those interested in the university mission in Africa. Such a journey is nevertheless ambitious in its scope and scale. This difficulty is illustrated by the question "How do you write about Africa?", which is in fact the title of an essay by the author, Binyavanga Wainaina. He responds sarcastically by recommending:

The African characters must be colourful, exotic, larger than life, but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories...¹

With this response, the author warns against clichés and simplistic discourses often associated with external accounts of Africa. While this book avoids this trap since the authors are talking about themselves and their own campuses, it must nevertheless avoid another pitfall inherent in internal narratives: that of the "single story". Chinua Achebē addresses this issue by saying: "*I don't see African literature as a single unit, but as a group of associated units.*"²

The authors of this book are no exception. In this book, they talk about their lives, their interactions with the questions of their peers on campus. These chapters are infused with personal anecdotes, interviews with other students and third parties, as well as dialogues with other authors and the ensuing discussions.

In addition to the images of the kola nut and the palaver tree mentioned at the beginning of the book, we can represent this sum of testimonies, in its form, with 'khanga' imagery (these multi-coloured and multi-shaped loincloths found under different names in various African capitals). This diversity is evident in the provenance of the authors - from Senegal to the DRC, from Burkina Faso to Madagascar - as well as in the themes addressed, the methodological approaches adopted, the personal experiences recounted and the underlying contexts. This mosaic is not simply a stylistic choice, but reflects the structures and vision underlying this book, namely those of the GBUAF and the Logos and Cosmos Initiative Francophone Africa (LCI-FA) programme. However, beyond this

¹ <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>

² Charles E. Nnolim, *Issues in African literature*, African Books Collective, 2010.

diversity, our aim is to ensure coherence and unity around the vision of the LCI-FA program, which is best expressed by the General Secretary of IFES:

"Mobilise Christian students and professors to talk about their Christian faith and their academic disciplines and apply them to the key issues being faced in their countries.³ "

Despite all the precautions taken, the aim is not to achieve perfection, but to invite people to trust God. Over the past two years, I've had the grace and opportunity to be part of the team that accompanies the participants in the LCI FA program, known as 'catalysts'. My academic background in IT engineering didn't prepare me for teaching, so my initial reaction was naturally the usual question: "Why me?" However, an attitude even more common than this question is the lack of humility that leads us to believe that we deserve what we are offered.

By accompanying the catalysts, we can fully appreciate the challenges they face and the discouragement that can result. These challenges include academic curricula that are rarely updated, the absence of well-equipped libraries, and the lack of access to a high-quality Internet connection. These factors show to what extent university students are often cut off from the sources of knowledge. Not to mention the precarious conditions in which they have to study, in the hope of obtaining a degree that will open prospects in an uncertain job market. How can we equip these students to meet the challenges of their context? This is the challenge of the ILC program. Above all, this initiative is an invitation to humility and trust in God. Isn't this the attitude to which the various biblical characters were called when they received the response: "*I will be with you*" (Exodus 3:12-14, NIV).

The authors of this book do not present themselves as experts in their field of study, nor as specialists in local dynamics. Their approach makes no claim to such mastery. Our prayer is that every student who reads this book will be inspired and encouraged to respond to this call by placing their trust in the Lord.

Science and faith in Francophone Africa

So I invite you to look beyond the surface and consider the substance of this book. More specifically, examine how it contributes to the overall reflection on the dialogue between science and faith.

³ <https://lci.ifesworld.org/fr/>

I still find the framework proposed by David N. Livingstone in *Science and Religion Around the World* very useful, where he states that :

The history of encounters between particular scientific enterprises and specific religious enterprises must be even more complicated if we are to do justice to the complexities of historical archives, rather than succumb to the lure of a simplifying typology.⁴

In his view, there is always a risk that the generic terms 'science' and 'religion' will be imported with their meanings, contours and relationships, as they are conceived in one part of the world, and then clumsily imposed on endogenous realities in another. In his view, the simple starting point of defining science and religion proves that historical and cultural parameters cannot be excluded. Take, for example, the notion of *religion*. A foreign observer attending a '*Kubandwa*' ceremony in the Great Lakes region would be exposed to various initiation rituals: evocation of the spirit, scenes of subjugation or possession, initiation into the ritual in which the novice will play an attributed role, and so on. If they can understand the language, they will hear cult conversations such as this one:

The initiator replies: "Reign gloriously, be safe! You answer: Hou! vanquish our enemies, hou, vanquish our assailants, hou! Strengthen him on whom you rest, hou, give health to the cattle and the household, hou, give health to the babies, hou, fertilise the fields, hou, give strength to my boss, hou, and now you've given me cattle, children, a protector, hou, well, to all, give them, for me, health, hou, that's why I offer you this fermented drink, hou, drink, you and yours, then, deign to accept my offering so that in turn I can praise myself, hou, bring back my cattle, hou!"⁵

Our foreign observer would be far from perceiving the importance that the participants associate with worship. They would find it difficult to understand that this practice constitutes a system of psychological security, and guarantees a sociocultural order, if they were content to project their own conceptions, terminologies and personal considerations onto what they were observing. Klaas Bom puts it this way:

Reading other religious and cultural traditions through the prism of a certain understanding of 'religion' always highlights some elements,

⁴ John Hedley, Brooke, and Ronald L., Numbers, eds. *Science and Religion around the World*, OUP USA: 2011.

⁵ Francois M. Rodegem, "*La motivation du culte initiatique au Burundi*." *Anthropos* H. 5./6 (1971): 863-930

obscures others and can potentially distort crucial aspects of the traditions.⁶

This problematic approach also contrasts with the one adopted by this book, which emphasizes on *listening*. Indeed, the verbs 'import' and 'impose' leave no room for observing and listening to the facts and realities on the field. By listening carefully, local realities always have the potential to reveal a new conceptualisation of the notions of 'science' and 'faith', as well as maintaining a nuanced relationship between the two. David N. Livingstone proposes to make this relationship more complex in order to open up a space in which local realities can reveal alternatives to the current discourse on the relationship between Science and Faith.

In what follows, we will look at a few points from the previous chapters that contribute in a different way to the overall debate on Science and Faith.

The condition of hybridity

Right at the start of the book, the notion of hybridity is introduced as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary African thought. Innocent Niyongabo points out that "*with colonisation, Africa experienced a mutation of its socio-cultural and religious balance...*", which imposes on today's African researcher the duty to "*scrutinise identity through a globally multicultural prism..., to explore hybrid identity and the dialogue between science, faith and culture in order to foster relevant and sustainable scientific intervention in its specific context*".

This condition of hybridity, specific to formerly colonised societies, structures the way of thinking of African intellectuals by placing them at the crossroads of the influences of their traditional heritage and the dynamics of modernisation. Navigating this complex space remains a challenge, as researchers have to negotiate and articulate these influences, which are sometimes in tension, in order to build a coherent epistemological and methodological basis for their research.

This dual approach is evident throughout the book's chapters. Moustapha Ouedraogo, in his chapter "*Why are African universities failing to train political leaders of integrity and competence?*", explores this tension between traditional and modern influences to analyse the impact of university education on governance practices. It identifies two main causes of this problem: (a) the dislocation of traditional approaches in the education system and (b) the inadequacy of university training models and methods.

⁶ Brooke, John Hedley, and Ronald L. Numbers, eds. *Science and Religion around the World*. OUP USA, 2011.

Quoting the author Amadou Hampate Ba, he shows that the initiation method functioned like a vortex, enabling the initiate to be trained by forging social, psychic and spiritual links, while at the same time conferring on him the "moral and mental power" essential to his development. Moustapha Ouedraogo locates the nature of the problem he explores in the rupture brought about by the modern school, which has isolated the education system from its social context. This dislocation has led to a loss of identity and a dissolution of the traditional foundations of education, thereby compromising the link between education, society and culture.

While Moustapha Ouedraogo analyses the problem in terms of a dislocation between traditional and modern educational models, Sarah Abdou Salifou approaches the issue in terms of competing interpretations. The Nigerien context she examines reveals a diversity of beliefs about the origin and treatment of illnesses. Although trained in modern medicine, her role is not to bring these different visions into dialogue. Yet her experiences lead her to question the relevance of a strict separation between cultural beliefs and medical practice, raising questions about the conflicting model of science and faith dialogue that modern education would assume.

The prism of hybridity, introduced at the beginning of the book, serves as a reading grid for most of the chapters. It is precisely with this in mind that the LCI training program in Francophone Africa adds the notion of *culture* to talk about the dialogue between science, faith and culture. This addition underlines the importance of the historical and social context in the development of knowledge and practices, recognising culture as an indispensable element in the dynamics of thought and learning.

Acting locally or universally

In the chapter entitled "*Why should we, as scientists and Christians, start with listening*", Stephen Ney highlights the importance of social impact in the training of scientists in Africa. He takes as an example Jean-Marc Éla's criticism of foreign approaches to the production of knowledge and the search for solutions, which are often focused on competitiveness and short-term problem-solving. It is for this reason that the chapters in this book begin with a listening approach, enabling the authors to carry out an "*exegesis of their campus and their context*".

However, an excessive focus on the immediate context, a localised and microscopic reading, also entails risks. According to Paulin Hountondji, research confined to the local level runs the risk of being locked up in particular details, preventing it from engaging in dialogue on a universal level. More specifically, he shows that a focus on local issues often leads to the borrowing of existing theoretical frameworks, reducing the African researcher to the role of 'informant' within an academic structure dominated by external perspectives. This argument is based on the fact that

scientific research is built on previous work. When it is too focused on the immediate and the local, it loses the ability to take a global and critical look at the often implicit assumptions of knowledge. Paulin Hountondji describes this danger in the following terms:

They become intellectually closed in on themselves, missing out on an essential phase of a well-balanced intellectual journey: the independent creation of theoretical models, the development of global conceptions that subsequently facilitate a precise understanding of particular details as such.⁷

The chapters in this book illustrate the balance between the particular and the universal recommended by Jean-Marc Éla and Paulin Hountondji.

In *"Pourquoi l'Église évangélique est-elle insensible à la crise environnementale"* (*Why is the Evangelical Church insensitive to the environmental crisis*), Sambo Ouedraogo analyses the silence of Evangelical churches in the face of ecological issues in Burkina Faso. Among the reasons given, he mentions *particularism*, which he attributes to the priority given to socio-economic issues in his context: *"Protestant churches are often focused on urgent social issues such as poverty, health, education and social justice"*.

These concerns, legitimate though they are, take up most of the attention of Christian communities, relegating the environmental issue to second place. This neglect feeds a vicious circle, because the causes of local social problems are partly linked to the environmental crisis. Sambo Ouedraogo proposes ecotheology as an appropriate response, highlighting the role that the Church could play in this area.

In *"How can we, as Christians, respond to the mental health problems of students"*, Nina Toualy Ble Zrampieu tackles the issue of mental health. Like Sambo Ouedraogo, she notes a lack of awareness and interest in the subject. She illustrates this attitude with a revealing quote: *"The 'Whites' have once again sent a new form of spiritual numbing for African Christians."*

This perception reflects ignorance and neglect of mental illness in her context. According to the African Union's Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, mental health in Africa is often :

... considered taboo and sometimes linked to superstitious practices such as witchcraft. People suffering from mental disorders often face discrimination and deprivation of their fundamental rights.⁸

⁷ Hountondji, Paulin J. "Endogenous knowledge: Research trails" (1997).

⁸ <https://africacdc.org/news-item/mental-health-a-universal-human-right-for-africans/>

These misperceptions, whether expressed-as in the case of ignorance-or implicit-as in the case of disinterest-must be challenged. Nina Toualy Ble Zrampieu calls for a culture of psychosocial care, to enable community members to develop in a healthy way and have a positive impact on their environment.

Although the chapters in this book do not yet propose new theoretical models adapted to local realities - a task for future work - they do demonstrate an effort to balance local concerns with global scientific and intellectual debates.

A pluralist context

The remark about the 'single story' at the beginning of this chapter does not only concern writers, but its critique is also found in other disciplines dealing with Africa. "*Certainly, there is no African identity that can be designated by a single term, named by a single word or encompassed in a single category*⁹", says philosopher Achille Mbembe in his critique of African essentialism. By essentialism, he refers to symbolic terms that attempt to reduce a set of characteristic features of a group of people to a fixed, homogenous essence, thereby denying the diversity and complexity of that group. Expressions such as "This is African culture" or questions such as "Are you African" are examples of this.

Let's listen once again to David Livingstone, whom we met at the beginning of this chapter. He recommended *complicating* the science-faith dialogue to do justice to the multiple models that exist in different contexts. One of the approaches he recommends is *pluralisation*. According to him, we do not talk about science, but about sciences, to include all perspectives and approaches to scientific practice in relation to *religions*. This is important advice to bear in mind when considering the contributions of *Francophone Africa*.

Klaas Bom and Benno Van Den Toren, in their work on the 'science and religion' debate in the context of Francophone Africa, justify the choice of this region because it offers

"the confluence of three different cultural influences: traditional African cultures/religions, Western colonial and post-colonial involvement and, relatively independent of the latter, Christian mission and African Christianity¹⁰".

⁹ Mbembé, J-A., and Steven Rendall, "African modes of self-writing", *Public culture* 14.1 (2002): 239-273.

¹⁰ Bom, Klaas, and Benno Van Den Toren, *Context and catholicity in the science and religion debate: intercultural contributions from Francophone Africa*: Brill, 2020.

Such a framework has the potential to offer multiple local versions of the relationship between science, faith and culture. According to these researchers, students in this region can fall into two major groups of cultural influences: either 'traditional culture, modernity and Christianity', or 'traditional culture, modernity and Islam'. This categorisation can be seen throughout this book.

Consider, for example, how Sarah Abdou Salifou, in her testimony, came face to face with a Muslim patient and, through her exchange, learned that in her context she would have to "*acquire other skills and characters necessary to fulfil my role*". She describes this context as "*secular, yet dominated by Islam itself influenced by cultural backgrounds*". If Sarah Abdou Salifou wants to analyse the practices and beliefs surrounding physical health, she will have to take account of the predominance of Islam in her country, which she estimates to be 95% majority. The patterns of interaction between religious beliefs and scientific practices that Sarah will perceive in Niger will obviously be different from those that Onesphore Hakizimana will find in Rwanda, with an estimated 93.6% Christianity rate. These disparities in representation should be taken into consideration while analysing the ways in which religious beliefs and scientific practices interact.

We can also study the relationship between the three factors mentioned above and the State.

We can see the State as the institution that reinforces health policies, which in many Francophone African countries are based on modern science. In this position, does the State offer us another angle of reading? In his chapter on "*Is religion an ally or an obstacle to the promotion of public health in Africa*", Eustache Hounyeme observes a tension "*between faith and the imperatives of public health*". This reading opens with an analysis of modes of governance, themselves influenced by historical contextual factors. The case cited by Klaas Bom and Benno Van Den Toren¹¹ is that of *secularism*. In their research, they test the hypothesis that a society whose education is influenced by *secularism* (separation of State and Church) will have individual effects on the understanding of the relationship between faith and science. Although Eustache Hounyeme's work does not provide enough data to draw any conclusions, it does provide us with avenues of analysis to better understand the complexity of the interactions between faith, science and public health policies.

Finally, we cannot overlook the multiplicity of traditional cultures and beliefs and the variability of interactions they entail with the other factors under consideration in this book. One of the notable points that these cultures and beliefs have in common in the context of sub-Saharan Africa is the profound interconnection between what the modern West would categorise as 'science' and 'religion'. Rather than being separate domains, these knowledges and practices are often

¹¹ Bom, Klaas, and Benno Van Den Toren. *Context and catholicity in the science and religion debate: intercultural contributions from Francophone Africa*. Brill, 2020.

intertwined, particularly in fields such as metallurgy and ecology, where technical knowledge is integrated with ritual and spiritual practices. Isaac Daama, for example, observed in a study conducted in northern Cameroon how artisanal mining in the region is linked to traditional religious and cultural practices in the exploration and extraction of minerals.¹² He documented the process of extracting substances, which includes various rituals such as fasting, animal offerings, incantations and prayers. These practices are based on the world view of the mining community. During the metal extraction phase, they may move from one site to another depending on the circumstances, as they believe that "*precious metals migrate underground in the footsteps of the gods, and if the gods have left a place, they take all the riches with them*". This heritage, which stems from pre-colonial traditions, continues to influence the contemporary dynamics of the relationship between science and religion in Francophone Africa.

This plurality, shaped by different cultural, historical and religious influences, offers valuable opportunities for rethinking the relationship between science, religion and society in Francophone African countries.

¹² Daama, Isaac. "Artisanal Mining and Primal Beliefs in North Cameroon," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 26.20 (2023): 30-35.