

ENVISIONING CULTURALLY-INFORMED EDUCATION

(Contextualizing Nigerian Stories, Proverbs and Idioms)

Proposed Paper at The Religious Education Association Annual Meeting (RIG)

Reconsidering the Power of Story in Religious Education

November 3-5, 2006

By

Anthony Mario Ozele, PhD

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INTRODUCTION: There is an increasingly unequivocal interest in the interaction between the Christian faith and culture throughout the world. This interaction challenges religious education to critically engage local cultures in dialectical dialogue. Various terms have been applied in an attempt to encapsulate this interaction, such as: enculturation, acculturation, inculturation, and interculturalization.¹ Of these, inculturation has become one of the most pivotal points of discourse in the African church. Peter K. Sarpong writes that inculturation simply means using all of our culture as a God-given gift to serve God.² Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that inculturation refers to the way the gospel is lived and practiced in Africa.³ The *Lineamenta* on Ecclesia in Africa states that for Christianity to be effective in the cultural context of the peoples, the church must, "... have recourse without undue hesitation, to philosophy, to the wisdom of peoples, that is, to their customs, their sense of life and their social order. This should be done both for a better comprehension of the revealed message as well as for an evaluation of those cultural values."⁴ This process both challenges the gospel to be true to the values of Jesus and to be open to appreciating the positive values in other cultures, and also challenges culture to be true to its life-giving values and to be open to critique in the face of the gospel.

One of the basic problems the Catholic Church in Nigeria has consistently been confronted with in its educational ministry is the cultural life forms of the people. On the one hand, it was the earlier missionary policy that required converts from traditional religion to give up all that belonged to their former faith that has resulted in the cultural impoverishment of the Christian faith. On the other hand, the Nigerian church uncritically adopted the Western cultural patterns which the earlier missionaries introduced and passed on. For long the pedagogical patterns for religious education fostered an attitude of alienation from the cultural kinship of the people, which is very much at the heart of their identity. Further, the growing influence of the western media seems to be creating a transition of the traditional culture to the Western culture, especially in the urban areas and cities. Thomas Wisner writes, "Cultural identity seems to be on the defensive all over the world as most people live in more than one culture."⁵

Using a philosophical methodology, this paper explores issues of the church's educational ministry and its cultural context; the importance of contextualization; the

¹ Aylward Shorter, *Toward A Theology of Inculturation*. (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 5ff.

² Peter K. Sarpong, *Can Christianity Dialogue with African Traditional Religion*, (essay online); accessed on August 24, 2006, available on <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/sarpong.html>.

³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "African Culture and Gospel," in *One Gospel-Many Cultures*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Hendrick M. Vroom (Amsterdam: World Alliance for Reformed Churches Theological Subcommittee of the European Area Committee-1995-2003, 2003).

⁴ *Lineamenta: Synod of Bishops Special assembly for Africa*. The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000: You Shall Be My witnesses (Acts 1:8), 52 cited in Oliver A. Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion & Culture* (Enugu: Snaap Press, Ltd, 1991), 156.

⁵ Thomas Wieser, ed., *Whither Ecumenism? A Dialogue in the Transit Lounge of the Ecumenical Movement*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 4

power of the narrative tradition in Nigerian societies; and how the Nigerian church can inculcated the gospel message while sustaining her traditional values.

Nigerian societies place premium value on the importance of stories for education. Roy Baumeister and Leonard Newman argue that the narrative gives shape to the experiences of individuals and turns the raw data of experience into meaning.⁶ This is a foundation upon which religious educators can build. And when the church refuses to accede to rigid dogmatism and hegemonic relativism, but instead steps onto the arena of pluralistic relationality and engages its cultural environment in a dialectical dialogue, it breaks open its own story for all to appreciate.

The Educational Ministry of the Church

Several biblical foundations can be identified for the educational ministry of the church. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses challenged the Israelite community to relate their faith in Yahweh to the practical experiences of daily living.⁷ Robert Pazmino writes, “This passage from Deuteronomy provides insights about the goals, the teacher, the student, the content, and the setting of biblical education.”⁸ The foundational essence of the Deuteronomic education is that faith, manifested by acts of love, is to be integrated into every aspect of the life of the individual and the community. This essence is foundational because it forms the basis of human relations in the community, and by extension, the foundations of every ministry.

In Christian theology the ministry of the historical Jesus is understood as an exemplification of God’s own eternal will and character. Jesus is for Christians a kind of aperture through which insights into the divine presence can be perceived. In this regard, Pazmino writes, “The life and ministry of Jesus is the fullest expression of the nature of education that is described in these passages from Deuteronomy. Christ is the life, the Word incarnate, and the ultimate source for liberation and celebration.”⁹ Hence, from its early beginnings the Christian community, which understood itself as the “body of Christ,” understood its ministry as an extension of that of Jesus. Although the members of the body are many and the gifts of the Spirit diverse, there is a fundamental Christ—likeness which is to characterize Christian living and service (ministry). As Jesus had been among them “as one who serves,” Luke 22:27, so too his followers become ones who serve.

Maria Harris argues that to understand the educational ministry of the church, one has to return to the original New Testament description of the life of the early church in Acts 2, which she considers as “one of the founding documents of the Christian Church.”¹⁰ She writes:

The central *teaching* of the Church (which is also its central kerygma or proclamation) is announced in Acts with the words: “This Jesus God has raised up,

⁶ See Roy F. Baumeister and Leonard S. Newman, "How Stories Make Sense of Personal Experiences: Motives that Shape Autobiographical Narratives," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, no. 20 (December 1994).

⁷ See Deuteronomy 6:1-2, 4-9

⁸ Robert W. Pazmino, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 20.

⁹ *Ibid.* 26.

¹⁰ Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville, KN: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 20.

and of that we are all witnesses” (2:32). Then the account proceeds:

And they continued steadfastly in the *teaching* of the apostles and in the *communion of the breaking of the bread* and in the *prayers*. And all who believed were together and held all things in *common* and would sell their possessions and good and *distribute them among all according as anyone had need*. And continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread in their houses, they took their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and being in favor with all the people. (Acts 2:42, 44-47, italics added)¹¹

From the texts of Deuteronomy 6 and Acts 2 referred above, one can infer that religious education, first, is not an abstraction. The content of religious education emphasizes a lived out faith characterized by love, community and sharing, and not just a knowing faith characterized by memorized creedal formulas and prayers. Hence, the educational ministry of the church should pay adequate attention to both the cognitive and affective domains. Both cannot be separated if the desired end of the intellectual analysis of faith content is to be ethical activity.

Thomas Groome thinks that developmental knowing always involves two totalities. First, of the total person, which in *Christian Religious Education* he discusses as combining affectivity and rationality,¹² and which he later expands in *Sharing Faith* under the rubric “conation.”¹³ What he means by “conation” is a certain wisdom that is present in a “holistic capacity and disposition people have to realize their own ‘being’; it is the agency that undergirds one’s cognition, affection, and volition.”¹⁴ Conation is the intentional formation toward the historically responsible realization of “our sensations, actions, cognitions, affections, choices, decisions—it is both consequence and source of who we are and what we do in time and place. In gist, it is our style of ‘being.’”¹⁵ For Groome, it seems as if there is nothing that can be isolated phenomenologically about our “being” that cannot itself also be understood as a site of “knowing.” Second, knowing always takes place with respect to one’s experience of the total life—situation, both personal and social-cultural. Therefore, knowing is always political.¹⁶ Thus, the knowing individual construes faith as believing, in addition to trusting and doing. He writes, “Epistemology and ontology, ‘knowing’ and ‘being’ should be united in the philosophical foundations of religious education.”¹⁷

Also, the educational ministry of the church is carried out within the context of a genuine faith community. Jesus shared his ministry with those he had called to himself, and both the texts of Deuteronomy and Acts underlie this communal aspect of education,

¹¹ Ibid. 20-21.

¹² Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 15-17.

¹³ _____, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 25-32.

¹⁴ Ibid. 27.

¹⁵ Ibid. 30.

¹⁶ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 15-17.

¹⁷ Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 8.

in an integral network of relationships that are intergenerational, and gender inclusive.¹⁸ Such integrative and intergenerational education increases the ability of a community to pass on the faith to its young people in ways that are more effective and more convincing, giving its children and youth lively and inspiring models of faith. Leon McKenzie writes,

...religious learning takes place not only as a consequence of rational-discursive treatments of theological topics but also as a result of learners being-served and being-together. This is to say that the kerygma is instantiated in the serving community in a trans-discursive or existential mode. While programs that address explicit theological subject matters are altogether appropriate, programs that bring people together in the context of church and programs that address the everyday needs of people also explicate the implications of the resurrection at another level.¹⁹

Another element of religious education deriving from the texts of Deuteronomy and Acts is that, it is a lifelong learning and development process. Jesus was insistent in his teaching that the Kingdom of God was both a present and future reality. In the thinking of Groome, it is the experience of the kingdom of God, both in the scripture and in our present, that reveals God to humans and humans to each other. His reasoning suggests that it is the experience and promise of the kingdom that makes Christology and theology intelligible and practicable to knowing subjects. He writes that “grace comes to us in our present to enable us to live lives that make the Kingdom present even now. By such lives, we help prepare the ‘material’ for its final realization.”²⁰ Again, “God’s action at the end of history and within history is inseparable, as God’s time is one time.”²¹ Religious education fosters a profound and life—long appreciation of the times and the transforming power of grace. However, Jerold Apps contends that much of what is done in church does not accomplish this. He writes,

The more traditional forms of church adult education have been concerned with passing on the traditions of the church and studying the Bible without reference to contemporary life. This form of adult education often ignores the problems of society or the individual problems of members. I believe the church has the responsibility of providing adults with the information and insight that will help them with their individual problems and will help them understand better the problems of society and the contributions they can make to solving these problems.²²

Yet another element of religious education is that it hands on tradition. Moran reasons that, “In nearly all the major religions, tradition is a peculiar and paradoxical

¹⁸ See Gabriel Moran, *Religious Education as a Second Language* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1989), 233-236.

¹⁹ Leon McKenzie, "The Purpose and Scope of Adult Religious Education," in *Handbook of Adult Religious Education*, ed. Nancy Foltz (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 17.

²⁰ Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 45.

²¹ *Ibid.* 46.

²² Jerold W. Apps, *How to Improve Adult Education in Your Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 10-11.

idea.”²³ For religious consciousness, tradition can be considered as the relationship between the word and the reality it expresses; the contextual expression of the relationship between the believer and God. This is often handed on in the form of story. Moran writes:

Education as tradition means that it starts as physical handing on. The family conveys its rituals of life and death; parents are a kind of secret society with knowledge not available in books. The family’s tradition becomes verbal in the telling of stories, some that pertain directly to the family, others that are about a larger community. The individual’s parent’s intention in telling a story may be dwarfed by the intentionality embodied in the story itself. The story can carry the intentions of generations of parents. The tradition is the teller of the story—whether Irish, Jewish, Afro—American, or smaller groups of people—while the parent is a kind of sounding board.²⁴

Following Moran’s thinking one can argue that tradition is not static but dynamic; a constant interpretation and articulate critique of the reality of existential relationship between the believer and God.

Contextualizing Religious Education

In Christian theology, contextualization is the effort to understand and take seriously the specific context of each human group and person on its own terms and in all its dimensions—cultural, religious, social, political, economic—and to discern what the Gospel says to people in that context. Contextualization takes very seriously the example of Jesus in the sensitive and careful way he offered each person a Gospel tailored to his or her own context.²⁵

The question of exactly what constitutes contextualization is a complex one. Contexts are often complex histories interpreted depending on the bifurcation of thought patterns and human experiences can be ambiguous. One single definition hardly can do justice to the intricate concepts involved in contextualization. Yet Douglas John Hall argues that contextualization is a given for Christianity. He writes, “To claim that Christian theology is by definition contextual is to insist that the *engagement* of the milieu in which theology is done is as such a dimension of the doing of theology.”²⁶ He argues further, “Theology lives *between* the stories—God’s story of the world, and humanity’s ever-changing account of itself and all things. *Theology is what happens when the two stories meet.*”²⁷

Theology does not happen in a vacuum, but takes place in the complex daily realities of human life and in the dynamics of interaction with the immediate environment, as well as the entire ecosystem. Hence, theology has to be contextual. Stephen Bevans insists that contextualization,

²³ Gabriel Moran, *Religious Education as a Second Language*, 50.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Charles R. Taber, "Contextualization and/or Transformation," in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. Don M. McCurry (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1979), 146.

²⁶ Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 75.

²⁷ Ibid. 91. The emphases are in the original text.

.... is a way of doing theology that takes into account four things: 1) the spirit and message of the Gospel; 2) the tradition of the Christian people; 3) the culture of a particular nation or region; and 4) the social change in that culture, due both to technological advances on the one hand and struggles for justice and liberation on the other.²⁸

David Hesselgrave writes,

Contextualization is the process whereby representatives of a religious faith adapt the forms and content of that faith in such a way as to communicate and (usually) commend it to the minds and hearts of a new generation within their own changing culture or to people with other cultural backgrounds.²⁹

As a dynamic process of reflection and dialectical interaction, contextualizing religious education in the Nigerian society has to do with more than just doctrine or orthodoxy. Rather, it has to do with the shaping of the whole life of the Christian community—including its theology—as it both thinks through and gives public expression to its faith, while living out its life and mission through full and active participation in the cultures of which it is a consistent, active, and responsible part. Onwubiko argues that the African values of community living need to be theologically interpreted and applied as authentic Christian and ecclesial values.³⁰ In other words, effective religious education should be sufficiently inculturated.

Contextualizing religious education culturally makes it clear that it is always with people, not just doctrines, theological ideas or systems of belief that the church is concerned. And such people live in particular social—cultural contexts which cannot be wished or explained away. Culturally-informed religious education will inspire people to become sensitive to their relationship with their cultural heritage in order to have a basis for understanding others in their cultural environment. Hence, religious education cannot be limited to the task of supporting doctrinal identifications; it must also include personal encounters with the cultural values of the society in which the church ministers.

In an age characterized by socio—political and economic emasculation and the devaluing of human life, religious education needs a pedagogical framework that enables people to understand for themselves and to commit to the concrete living of Christian meaning and values. Brennan R. Hill writes, “Religious education is always carried out in the context of culture, or the way of life that is led by a given people or society.”³¹

The Art and Influence of Narrative

Annette Simmons writes that, “Basically, a story is a narrative account of an event

²⁸ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, revised and expanded ed. (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 186.

²⁹ David J. Hasselgrave, "Contextualization and Revelational Epistemology," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, ed. Rademacher D. Earl and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co, 1984), 694.

³⁰ Oliver A. Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion & Culture* (Enugu: Snaap Press, Ltd, 1991), 96.

³¹ Brennan R. Hill, *Key Dimensions of Religious Education* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1988), 63.

or events—true or fictional.”³² Dorothy Sayers opines that stories are acts of experience, expression, and recognition.³³ The Christian faith is a story that begins in the covenant faith of God’s people, reaches its perfection in the person of Jesus Christ, and continues in the life of both the individual and the faith community. Susan Shaw argues that Christian convictions do not exist as entities separable from the story of which they are a part. She writes as follows:

Rather, the story gives rise to the convictions, and the story context provides the setting for the exploration of the validity of any religious conviction. Christian convictions develop partly from person’s interaction with the Christian story, and Christian convictions are tested out in the lived stories of those who participate in the Christian community.³⁴

Jesus used simple word-pictures, called parables, to help people understand his teachings. His vivid cultural illustrations captured the imaginations of his audiences more powerfully than any abstract presentation could. Through the centuries, stories have been used in conveying the message of the Christian faith.

Among the tribes of Africa, storytelling was considered training in listening and telling, and children were expected to listen and learn the stories they heard from their elders.³⁵ African stories, proverbs and idiomatic expressions are very imaginative and inventive, and are often a gentle way of guiding young people toward constructive personal values by presenting imaginative situations in which the outcome of both wise and unwise actions and decisions can be seen. The dialogical approach of these stories and proverbs is meant to stimulate empathic response than does a simple statement of fact, thus providing raw material for both cognitive appreciation and affective response.

Traditional Nigerian stories as told by the likes of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, etc., create a sense of cultural awareness through the glimpses that they afford into other people’s worldview. Because Nigerian stories have largely been handed down through time, they are examples of the heart and soul of the people who created them. They are treasured reminders of how life used to be (in both good and bad times), and they show non-members of that culture some of the thinking strategies and beliefs that have made different groups what they are in present times.

In a multicultural society such as Nigeria, stories are helpful in instilling a sense of unity and peaceful co-existence. Through the process of identification, the members of a multicultural audience could come to a better appreciation of their origins, similarities and differences.

An individual’s story can actually tap into the level of trans-cultural realities and give value to many personal stories. Ethnic stories of suffering can either stop at the level of one culture where they are filled with pity and blame or open up suffering at a trans-

³² Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: inspiration, influence, and persuasion through the art of storytelling* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 31.

³³ Dorothy Sayers, *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 86.

³⁴ Susan M. Shaw, *Storytelling in Religious Education* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1999), 83.

³⁵ Elin Greene, *Storytelling Art and Technique*, 3rd ed. (New Providence, N.J.: Bowker, 1996), 2.

cultural level.³⁶ Traditional stories of suffering can take people beyond themselves to identify with and understand universal suffering.

Inculturation of the Biblical story has been carried out from the first centuries of Christianity, and it can be argued to have been very fruitful. However, there could not be a particular time when it could be considered a task achieved. It must be taken up again and again, in relationship to the way in which cultures continue to evolve. Local churches have to make every effort to convert the foreign form of biblical inculturation they received into another form more closely corresponding to the culture of their own land.

Organizing the Educational Curriculum

One key element emerging from the above is the necessity of relating theological thought and everyday experiences in the organization of the church's curriculum. To facilitate this, several questions need to be asked and answered. These include: What is the fundamental underlying principle of the curriculum?; Is the curriculum liturgically based, in coordination with the liturgical season? Is it thematic based? Is it Lectionary based?; How does the curriculum use the Sacred Scriptures? Does it incorporate content and textual analysis, exegesis, form critique, etc?; How are biblical stories related to the indigenous stories of the people, and placed in the context of the individual or faith community's story?; Is the curriculum creative and imaginative, with adequate attention to the affect and not just the cognitive?; How does the curriculum theologically and spiritually engage the social-cultural issues of its environment?

From a learning congregation perspective, curriculum organizers will be setting the stage for religious educators not to be primarily focused on transmitting the faith to individuals, but rather on helping congregations actualize their shared vision of mission by learning and increasing their capacity for wise, intentional, and biblically informed action.

This researcher proposes an educational curriculum with a strong sense of dialogical pedagogy which will provide a forum in which questions are formed, raised, and addressed. Religious educators need to encourage believers-learners to share their stories and experiences of faith, to express their ideas and assumptions, to ask about the meaning of the church's traditions for their lives, and to exercise their imaginative and creative abilities. A dialectical interplay of thought patterns and perspectives will engender an atmosphere of openness for rethinking, re-envisioning and re-appropriating the individual believer's faith practice, the Church tradition, and the communal praxis.

This echoes Maria Harris' argument for a more holistic approach to religious education which indicates a shift "from individuals or officials as responsible agents to the whole community as responsible agent."³⁷ Her framework affirms that education cultivated by an entire Christian community functions broadly and widely embraces a plethora of activities beyond "schooling" or classroom instruction.³⁸ Harris goes on to propose a process whereby the entire community may become engaged in shaping the

³⁶ Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, first published in 1958 is one classic example. In simple prose, Achebe tells the story of the rise and fall of Okonkwo, a Nigerian whose sense of manliness is more akin to that of his warrior ancestors than to that of his fellow clansmen who have converted to Christianity. The tough, proud and hardworking Okonkwo is at once a quintessential old-order Nigerian character in whom children can identify the figure of their father, and whose ruin stand for the destruction of an entire culture.

³⁷ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People*. (Louisville, KN: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 47

³⁸ Ibid. 61-62

vision of congregation as the curriculum for religious education.³⁹ Norman Cooper proposes that the entire community of baptized be engaged in developing and owning their “local expression of the universal vision and mission of the church.”⁴⁰

CONCLUSION:

As our world continues to exhibit great diversity, the need for understanding and accepting the cultural differences among all people has never been more important. Thus, the challenge for religious educators is to present an effective culturally-informed education foundation by means of which faith communities, and indeed all people, can learn to appreciate other people’s religious experiences.

Stories are particularly important to the human mind because they foster a deeper understanding of the world humans share with the rest of creation. Reynolds Price writes as follows:

A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species *Homo sapiens* - second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day’s events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths.⁴¹

This paper is predicated on the argument that, contemporary goals of education reflect a movement away from passive memorization of compartmentalized content areas, toward more active participation in self-directed and collaborative learning experiences which are connected to the learners’ experience of everyday living. These goals reflect an awareness of the need of education to be connected to the context and content of the learners’ social-cultural exigencies, integrating theory with experience. Stories and proverbs have played a distinctive role in this process of contextualization of the Christian message. I then argue that Nigerian stories, proverbs, songs, and idioms provide a good framework for experiencing, understanding, and interpreting the cultures of the people, and hence an important resource for religious education which should be incorporated in the church’s educational curriculum. The goal culturally-informed education is not only to teach about other groups or peoples. It is also to help people become accustomed to the idea that there are many lifestyles, languages, cultures, and points of view, and to attach positive feelings to multicultural experiences so that each person among whom the church exists will feel included and valued.

³⁹ Ibid. 172ff

⁴⁰ Norman P. Cooper, *Collaborative Ministry: Communion, Contention, Commitment*. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1993), 70

⁴¹ Reynolds Price, *A Palpable God: Thirty Stories Translated from the Bible With an Essay on the Origins and Life of Narratives* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1985), 63.

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