

Introduction

Diane B. Stinton

Conversations 'on the way'

Imagine their shock! With hearts of lead, they trudged the dusty way homewards to Emmaus. The only way to ease their pain was to share it in conversation together as they walked. After a while, a stranger drew near and walked with them, listening in to their gloomy despair. Yet they were not able to recognize him. The stranger asked, 'What's this you're discussing so intently as you walk along?' (Luke 24.17, *The Message*). They just stood there, dejected, seemingly unable to speak. Then one of them, named Cleopas, replied, 'Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn't heard what's happened during the last few days?'

'What has happened?' he asked. In a torrent of grief, Cleopas and his companion poured out their profound sense of loss, hopelessness and bitter disillusionment: that Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet, mighty in word and deed before God and all the people, that the chief priests and leaders had him condemned to death and crucified, and that they had so hoped Jesus was the one who was going to deliver Israel from all her oppressors. Yet it was now the third day since his devastating death.

Then grief turned to perplexity as they recounted the strange events of that day. Some of the women disciples of Jesus had astounded them, saying they had gone to his tomb at dawn, only to find the stone rolled back and his body not there. Instead, the women spoke of angels announcing that he was alive! They rushed back to tell the other disciples, some of whom hurried back to the tomb and found it empty, just as the women had said. Yet they did not see Jesus.

At this point in Cleopas and his friend's account, the stranger interjected: 'So thick-headed! So slow-hearted! Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said? Don't you see that these things had to happen, that the Messiah had to suffer and only then enter into his glory?' He then started with the books of Moses and went on through the Prophets, pointing out and explaining all the references to himself in the Scriptures.

As they neared the village of Emmaus, the stranger appeared to be going further. But Cleopas and his friend urged him to stay with them, so he did. When they sat down together at the table, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened! They recognized

him as Jesus, just as he vanished from their sight. And they exclaimed to each other, 'Didn't we feel on fire as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us?'

Without any delay, they were back on the road again – this time the seven miles to Jerusalem vanishing behind them in their renewed vigour to tell the other disciples. As they burst into the room where their friends were gathered, their own news was delayed in the telling by their friends' exuberant cry, 'It's really happened! The Master has been raised up – Simon saw him!' Then in the flurry of excitement, Cleopas and his companion recounted everything that had happened to them 'on the way', and how they had come to recognize Jesus in their midst when he blessed and broke the bread.

The story continues with even greater suspense and exhilaration, as the Risen Christ suddenly appears among them all again to converse with them further, to convince them of the reality of his resurrection, and to commission them as his witnesses to all nations. Yet let's pause at this point in the Emmaus disciples' experience to consider: what do you think they talked about on their way back to Jerusalem? What questions might they have asked when they joined with their friends again? And what new insights or reflections emerged in that initial discussion when, completely overwhelmed with shock and delight, they grappled to make sense of the reality of the Risen Lord Jesus in their midst?

Conversations today

Imagine another scenario: almost two thousand years later, another group of Jesus' disciples dialogue together in Africa. Like the Emmaus disciples long ago, their hearts are leaden with disappointment, bordering on disillusionment. Their continent is bleeding from too many wars, their peoples divided along too many lines of nationality and ethnicity, of language and ideology, of economic class and religious creed, of age and gender. All too often, their wealthy rape the continent of its resources, with impunity, while their poor languish in poverty and preventable disease, without adequate regard. And yet, the Risen Christ appears powerfully in their midst, calling them to renewed hope on the basis of his own death and resurrection. How can they make sense of it – the exhilarating, life-transforming presence of Jesus alive, and the devastating conditions in which he appears?

As the conversations spread across Africa today, theologians call for 'Christian palaver'. The term 'palaver' comes from the Portuguese word *palavra*, meaning 'speech' or 'word', stemming from the Latin *parabola* ('parable', 'speech'). While the English term 'palaver' often carries the sense of prolonged, tiresome talk or idle chatter, the concept and practice of 'palaver' in Africa is very different. The fundamental notion of 'word' remains at the heart of African palaver, where the word, whether spoken or unspoken, carries great power for it can either create or destroy the community. The word

may be danced or dramatized or symbolized in art, or manifested in action or behaviour within the community.

Importantly, in Africa the concept of community is three-dimensional, encompassing the living, the dead and those not yet born. So, as Laurenti Magesa explains, 'The sole purpose of the African palaver aims at creating, strengthening or restoring relationships for the sake of "the fullness" of life of the community through fellowship among all three dimensions of the community' (Magesa, 2004: 161). In addition, the community exists only in relation to the Transcendent and the entire cosmos.

Bénézet Bujo adds that 'the art of the palaver consists in setting out on a journey of exploration' (Bujo, 2001: 76). Every member of the community has the right to participate, whether in speech or symbolic action. Hence African palaver guarantees equality in terms of accessing speech. In addition, the community reaches decisions not by compromise or voting according to the majority view, but only by establishing a solid consensus among all members. Thus the fundamental experience is based on communion, as participants engage together in 'receiving', 'chewing' and 'digesting' those words that bring life to the community. As Bujo explains,

In the palaver each person who speaks is a *ruminant* who, like certain animals, rechews the word eaten and drunk for a long time. In this way each person who speaks puts their word to the test so that the community can confirm or invalidate the vivifying effectiveness of what comes out of the mouth.

(Bujo, 1995: 21–2)

In the context of Christian palaver, the creative, life-giving Word of God has now become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Just as the Emmaus disciples came to perceive the Risen Jesus in the opening of Scripture and the breaking of bread, with overtones of the eucharistic celebration, so African believers come to perceive Christ's presence today through reflecting on Scripture and engaging in Christian worship and ministry. African palaver thus provides one image for understanding African theology, in terms of a serious conversation among believers who meditatively chew on the word of God in their respective contexts and offer an interpretation of its meaning and implications for communal consideration.

Certainly the process of constructing theology along these lines is not new to Africa. Indeed, early Christianity in Africa had an enormous impact in shaping the exegetical methods, doctrinal content and conciliar processes that have shaped Christian theology worldwide. Likewise, more recent conversations by African Christians in the past century have resonated around the globe, particularly with the shift of world Christianity from the global North to the global South. A few notable examples include the following: franco-phone Catholic priests met for a symposium in Paris, published as *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (Abble *et al.*, 1956), to contend for an African theology that takes into account the African heritage. Similarly, Protestant theologians held a consultation in Accra in 1955, published as *Christianity and African Culture*.

Even more influential in the development of African theology was the Ibadan Conference, organized by the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and published as *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (1969). Then in 1976, Africa hosted the First Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians in Dar es Salaam, which resulted in the founding of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. The corresponding foundation of the Ecumenical Association of African Theologians followed in 1977 in Accra. Significantly, the 1989 inauguration of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has greatly enhanced the contribution of women's perspectives into the ongoing theological conversations. Since then, these and other theological associations, plus a growing number of African theologians and theological journals, have stimulated the burgeoning literature on African theology.

As these conversations in theology have continued across the continent of Africa and beyond, the SPCK International Study Guide Series has made a valuable contribution to the process. In 1987, John Parratt edited *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, which drew together selected writings from African theologians representing various church traditions, plus geographical and linguistic regions. The aim was to introduce readers around the world, particularly in theological seminaries, to the wealth of emergent African theologies and to the major theological questions they raised. The volume was structured in three sections: Part 1 dealt with introductory issues such as defining African theology, tracing its development and outlining its sources and methodologies. Part 2 examined specific issues of doctrine, such as the doctrine of God, Christology, the cross, and salvation, from African perspectives. Part 3 addressed practical issues of the Church's ministry in the world, including healing and the role of the Church in society. The overall purpose was not only to introduce the ideas of leading African theologians, but also to stimulate original thought as Parratt encouraged readers to address themselves to the issues raised in the volume.

A decade later, in 1997, Parratt produced a second edition of *A Reader in African Theology*, in view of important developments in Africa that influenced the shape of African theology. He identified the most spectacular development as the achievement of majority rule in South Africa. With the end of apartheid and the consequent need for Black theology to be rethought, Parratt wondered what 'theology after Mandela' would look like. He also noted developments in the Church in Africa, including the 'third wave' of the newer Pentecostal movements and their impact in Africa, the noticeable rise in conservative evangelicals' engagement in debates about African theology, and the commendable increase in the contributions from women theologians plus the translations available from francophone theologians. On the basis of these developments, Parratt added further chapters to make the volume more current and more representative of the growing range of theological perspectives.

Now, another decade and more has passed, and there is need again to update the SPCK reader in view of further developments that shape African

theology. This present volume reflects both continuity with the previous editions and further innovation in theological expression in Africa. While there is little if any need today to justify the discipline of African theology, there is certainly ongoing need to consider methodological issues in its development. Therefore Part 1 addresses enduring methodological issues such as contextual methodological approaches, biblical exegesis and biblical hermeneutics.

Part 2 focuses on selected issues in contemporary African theology, including assessments of developments in the Catholic Church in Africa, the African Instituted Churches (AICs), and Pentecostalism in Africa. African contributions to Christian spirituality and ethics are also highlighted, as well as those of African women theologians. Then, in view of all the divisions that riddle Christianity across the continent, this section closes with a passionate plea for African Christian ecumenism.

Finally, Part 3 attends to issues arising in relation to the ministry of the Church in the wider world. If the end of apartheid in 1994 marked the most momentous event of the 1990s in Africa, undoubtedly the events of September 11, 2001, with the terrorist attacks in the USA and the subsequent, so-called war on terrorism, have most transformed the geopolitical world since then. Ramifications in Africa include the heightened need to responsibly address interfaith relations, as outlined in Chapter 11. Ongoing political and ethnic conflicts in Africa prompt the next two chapters: theological reflections on evil and suffering, from the context of prolonged civil war in the Sudan, and on Christian identity and ethnicity, illustrated from the contexts of Rwanda and Kenya. Chapter 14 advocates the theology of reconstruction, relevant to many contexts in Africa, and Chapter 15 assesses the state of the Church in postcolonial South Africa. The final chapter then directs our attention to what is perhaps the most striking of all developments in African Christianity: namely, its proliferation in diaspora, and its consequent significance to the present face of world Christianity.

Like any conversation, the current one has its constraints. It is necessarily limited in the number of participants involved and the theological issues addressed. The current selection follows previous editions in seeking representative men and women from various church traditions, geographical regions and linguistic zones. Unfortunately, it does not achieve the balance of anglophone, francophone, lusophone and especially African mother-tongue theologies that would ideally reflect such a conversation in African theology. Nor are the topics of discussion exhaustive, as further theological reflection is required on issues regarding globalization, environmental crises, good governance, constitutional reform, health care, human rights, sexuality and many other factors that hinder Africans from experiencing God's comprehensive *shalom* ('peace', 'well-being'), or the fullness of life Christ offers (John 10.10) through the power of the Holy Spirit (John 14.15–27).

So as you enter into this conversation, do what you would naturally do in any human conversation: first, listen carefully to what each speaker says.

Even before listening for the content of their ideas, get a feel for who the speaker is through the bio-data provided and through any additional research you can do. A person's theology almost certainly reflects his or her life experience, so try to discern what has shaped the person's views. Second, take note of how the various contributors reflect on Scripture and church tradition, how they engage with their own context, and how they draw these together in their current thinking. And third, take time to think carefully through the theological issues discussed. The questions at the end of each chapter are designed to assist you in reflecting personally on the readings, both to summarize key aspects of the theology expressed and to respond to the discussion yourself. To what extent do the theological issues arise in your own context? What insights do you gain from the African authors? What would you contribute to the conversation, either in agreement or disagreement, or by way of additional input from your own understanding and experience? And how might you act upon these discoveries in your own context of ministry?

Finally, keep in mind that this current conversation is truly 'on the way', in the double sense of the term. Just as the Emmaus disciples shared their hopes and fears, their certainties and their doubts, their grief and their joy 'on the way' of discovering the Risen Jesus with them, so African believers continue to grapple with recognizing and appropriating the Risen Christ in our midst today. So this current volume is simply one conversation along the way. In this sense, African theology, like any theology, is necessarily context-bound and provisional. However, the author of Luke-Acts uses the term 'way' literally, in terms of 'way, road', or as an action, 'way, journey', as in the account of the Emmaus disciples. Yet Luke also uses the term figuratively for 'way of God' (Luke 20.21), and Acts uses 'the Way' to designate the Christian community in its preaching and its praxis, or particular way of life (e.g. Acts 9.2; 19.9, 23; 22.4; 24.14, 22). In this sense, the present volume also represents African theology on the way, the way of Christ. Therefore, though these particular expressions of theology are admittedly contextual and provisional, they offer enduring insights on the way, as the Risen Christ meets with his people here in Africa today.