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Changing the Narrative of Sexuality in African Christianity: Bishop Christopher Senyonjo's LGBT Advocacy

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Abstract

This introduction to the special section dedicated to Bishop Christopher Senyonjo puts his ministry in the wider context of contemporary African Christianity, in particular African Christian politics of homosexuality and LGBT rights.

Keywords:

LGBT rights, homosexuality, Christianity, Africa, Bishop Senyonjo

From the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, African Christianity has increasingly become a site of politics against homosexuality and the rights of sexual and gender minorities, in particular LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people.¹ Many high profile examples can be referred to. Perhaps best documented is the leading role of several African Anglican bishops, in particular from countries such as Nigeria and Uganda, in strong opposition against the recognition of same-sex relationships and the ordination of lesbian and gay clergy in the global Anglican Communion, which became visible at the 1998 Lambeth Conference and in subsequent years – a controversy that has caused the Anglican Communion into crisis.² Also widely reported is the way in which evangelical and Pentecostal Christian leaders, in countries across the continent from Ghana to Uganda and from Zambia to Kenya, have heavily contributed to the politicisation of homosexuality and LGBT rights, leading campaigns for new or stricter anti-gay laws, firmly opposing the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and fuelling public debates with strongly-loaded anti-gay rhetoric.³ Also the Catholic Church, sometimes associated with a comparatively more tolerant

¹ For a broader discussion of this development, see van Klinken, 'Christianity and Same-sex Relationships in Africa'.

² See Hoad, 'Neoliberalism, Homosexuality, Africa'; Rubenstein, 'An Anglican Crisis of Comparison'; Vanderbeck et al, 'Sexuality, Activism, and Witness'; Ward, 'Same-sex Relations in Africa'. For accounts on the wider crisis over homosexuality in the Anglican Communion, and the role of African churches, see Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis*; Sachs, *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Anglicanism*.

³ See, for instance, the various case studies in Chitando and van Klinken, *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality*; Bompani and Valois, *Christian Citizens and the Moral Regeneration of the African State*.

stance on LGBT issues in Africa⁴, in several countries, such as Cameroon, has been actively involved in anti-gay campaigns.⁵

These mobilisations in African Christian circles are part of wider dynamics in which homosexuality and LGBT rights have become deeply politicised in African societies in recent decades, as part of postcolonial identity politics and in response to the growing recognition of same-sex relationships and LGBT identities in the West, and to the mainstreaming of LGBT rights in broader international human rights campaigns. Kapya Kaoma conceptualises these dynamics as a form of ‘protective homophobia’, and argues that they are driven, at least partly, by funding and support from conservative American evangelicals.⁶ Notwithstanding these transnational connections, Christianity – as a social institution and a public discourse – is a key part of contemporary public religion in sub-Saharan Africa, and as such shapes socio-political debates and moral agendas, specifically in relation to sexuality.⁷ This is not only significant for the politics of sexuality on the African continent itself, but also for the politics of sexuality in contemporary Christianity worldwide, as the case of the Anglican Communion illustrates. As a result of the widely documented demographic shift of Christianity to the global South, in particular its tremendous growth in Africa, the strong waves of anti-LGBT African Christian mobilisations shape the face of Christianity as a world religion. In the words of historian Andrew Walls, African Christianity must now be seen as ‘as a major component of contemporary representative Christianity, the standard Christianity of the present age, a demonstration of its character’.⁸

However, exactly for this reason it is of crucial importance not to homogenise African Christianity, and instead to complicate and nuance the generalising narrative of African Christian homophobia. Christianity in contemporary Africa is highly dynamic and internally diverse, representing a wide range of historical trajectories, socio-political orientations, theological perspectives, and therefore also of future possibilities. Indeed, there is evidence of emerging LGBT-affirming African Christian counter-mobilisations and narratives. LGBT Christians in several African countries are articulating their voices, and they also have begun organising themselves in grassroots communities and movements.⁹ Christian LGBT advocacy groups, such as Affirming and Inclusive Ministries in South Africa, House of Rainbow Fellowship, and the United Coalition of Affirming Africans, are active across the continent.¹⁰ Christian language and symbols are creatively appropriated in LGBT activist discourses.¹¹ Several African theologians have begun to develop theological treatments that affirm diverse sexualities.¹² Also some church leaders – most notably, Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa – have gone against the grain of mainstream Christian discourses by advocating

⁴ Ward, ‘Religious Institutions and Actors’.

⁵ Awondo, ‘Religious Leadership and the Re-Politicisation of Gender and Sexuality’. Also see Alava, ‘Homosexuality, the Holy Family and a Failed Mass Wedding’.

⁶ Kaoma, *Christianity, Globalization, and Protective Homophobia*.

⁷ See van Klinken and Chitando, *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*.

⁸ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 119.

⁹ Reid, *Above the Skyline*; van Klinken and Phiri: ‘In the Image of God’.

¹⁰ Macaulay, ‘Just as I Am, without One Plea’; van Klinken, ‘Culture Wars, Race and Sexuality’.

¹¹ van Klinken, *Kenyan, Christian, Queer*.

¹² Bongmba, ‘Homosexuality, Ubuntu, and Otherness’; Mombo, ‘Kenya Reflections’.

respect for sexual minorities, welcoming LGBT people in their communities, and positively affirming sexual diversity.¹³

Against this background, the present special section of *Theology and Sexuality* features one individual who has demonstrated exceptional courage and leadership in the politics of sexuality in African Christianity, Bishop Disani Christopher Senyonjo. Working in a country that in a 2011 BBC documentary was dubbed ‘the world’s worst place to be gay’,¹⁴ Uganda, Senyonjo’s life and work present a counter-narrative of how African religious and cultural traditions can promote human dignity and rights, especially in relation to sexual and gender diversity.

After a short career as a secondary-school teacher, Christopher Senyonjo studied at Buwalasi Theological College in Mbale, Uganda, and at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He graduated from the latter as a master of sacred theology and with a doctorate of ministry. He was ordained as deacon in the Anglican Church of Uganda in 1963, and a year later as priest. Soon after completing his studies in the US, he was appointed as lecturer at Bishop Tucker Theological College at Mukono, Uganda. In 1974, Christopher was enthroned as Bishop of the Diocese of West Buganda, a position he held for 24 years.

Throughout his career, Senyonjo’s service was aimed at ministering to the marginalised in society and at reconciling divisions in the church. This took a new direction after his retirement in 1998, when he came into contact with people ostracised because of their sexual orientation. Senyonjo became one of the few religious leaders in Uganda who actively supported members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and advocate the recognition of their human rights.

Among many other things, he has provided pastoral counselling to many members of the Ugandan LGBT community; openly testified against the Anti-Homosexuality Bill and was part of a delegation to the Ugandan House of Parliament to oppose it; was founder and executive director of St Paul’s Reconciliation and Equality Centre in Kampala, which up to date offers health, economic, psycho-social and spiritual services to people marginalised because of their sexuality; has advocated within the Church of Uganda the acceptance of LGBT people; and within the global Anglican Communion has spoken up for the recognition of sexual diversity. Senyonjo has documented the story of his life and ministry, as well as his pastoral and theological motivation, in his autobiography, meaningfully titled *In Defense of All God’s Children*.¹⁵

In the foreword to this autobiography, Serene Jones, as the President of Union Theological Seminary where Senyonjo studied, appropriately describes him as ‘a Christian minister in the prophetic tradition’, and as ‘a man of deep faith, grounded in compassion and humility’.¹⁶ As such, he is in the company of legendary figures such as Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, and many other powerful and inspirational men and women of God. Senyonjo has suffered personally as a result of his courageous leadership. In 2006 the Church of Uganda stripped him from all his entitlements as ordained minister and retired bishop. Yet he has also received international recognition of his ministry. In 2012 he received the Clinton

¹³ Chitando and Mapuranga, ‘Unlikely Allies?’

¹⁴ Mills, *The World’s Worst Place to Be Gay?*

¹⁵ Senyonjo, *In Defense of All God’s Children*.

¹⁶ Jones, ‘Foreword’, v-vi.

Global Citizenship award that honours outstanding individuals for their exemplary leadership and ground-breaking work that has effected positive, lasting social change. In the same year, he was prominently featured in the documentary film *Call Me Kuchu*, which documents LGBT struggles in Uganda, focusing in particular on activist David Kato who was murdered in January 2011 and at whose funeral Senyonjo spoke so powerfully and prophetically. Recognising his outstanding work as clergyman and LGBT human rights defender in Uganda, on 17 July 2018 the University of Leeds (United Kingdom) awarded Senyonjo the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

The two contributions to this special section, by Kevin Ward and Alistair McFadyen, are based on presentations delivered at a symposium marking and celebrating Senyonjo's honorary doctorate, hosted by the Leeds University Centre for African Studies and the Centre for Religion and Public Life, on 18 July 2018. These contributions help to understand the significance of Senyonjo's work in the context of the Church of Uganda, and Ugandan Christianity more generally (Ward), and in the context of Christian theology (McFadyen). During his visit to Leeds, I also had a chance to interview Senyonjo, and the transcription of that interview complements this section.

As much as this special section focuses on Senyonjo, the aim is not to present him as an extraordinary individual, but as a prominent face of an emerging LGBT-affirming narrative in Uganda and other parts of Africa. This is a recent narrative indeed, yet it builds on, and expands, existing strands of African Christian theology and lived Christianity, characterised by a commitment to social justice and human dignity.¹⁷ However marginal this narrative may seem in the cacophony of popular African Christian discourses, it does subvert the monolithic idea of "African Christian homophobia", and it alludes to another world possible, that is, the possibility of a manifestation of Christian faith that affirms the dignity of all human beings, and that allows for multiple forms of loving relationships.

At the moment of writing (December 2019), Ugandan MPs are planning to resubmit the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, on the basis of the popular idea that homosexuality is against the country's cultural and religious values. In another African country, Zambia – which according to its constitution is 'a Christian nation' – two men have just been sentenced for 15 years imprisonment because of 'acts against the order of nature'. These incidents demonstrate the ongoing need to foreground dissident voices, such as Senyonjo's, in support of the nascent, fragile but bold movement that reclaims Christian beliefs in order to defend the right of God's children, in all their diversity, to exist and flourish under the African sun.

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¹⁷ For instance, see Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist*; Katongole, *A Future for Africa*; Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos*.

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