

Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinarity in African Studies

Theology and the Other Sciences

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Abstract

In this essay, I discuss the importance of interdisciplinary approach to African theology and argue that in light of the challenges raised by the health care crisis, theologians, as well as other Africanists need to develop an interdisciplinary approach to the questions they raise and the solutions they propose to those questions.

Keywords

interdisciplinary – transdisciplinary – religion – theology – African studies

1 Introduction

In this essay, I discuss the importance of interdisciplinary approach to African theology and argue that in light of the challenges raised by the health care crisis, theologians, as well as other Africanists need to develop an interdisciplinary approach to the questions they raise and the solutions they propose to those questions. I begin the essay with a discussion of interdisciplinary studies and next discuss the neglect of theology by some in the African studies establishment, and argue that it is important for interdisciplinarity in African Studies that scholars recognise contributions from theology and scholars of religion.

Interdisciplinary studies emerged in the late twentieth century as an important way of doing research across disciplines, a process that in many ways chal-

lenged and embraced accepted assumptions about disciplines that structured the modern research university.¹ Those engaged in interdisciplinary studies challenged the dominance of disciplines by arguing that research is enriched when scholars include insights from different methodological perspectives and borrow ideas from other disciplines. Today, supporters of interdisciplinarity do not call for the abandonment of disciplines because they recognise disciplines as spaces for cultivating knowledge and grounding research prior to interdisciplinary dialogue. Interdisciplinary research now takes place in the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Scholars have understood interdisciplinarity from different perspectives and no single definition can do justice to the scholarly practices that have come to be known as interdisciplinarity. In general, it refers to research and scholarly writing that draws from more than one discipline to make its case. Thomas Benson rejects this enterprise on grounds that these approaches lack a clear definition, offer no pedagogical benefits, remains fragmentary, and therefore hinders competence in different disciplines. It also replaces academic rigor with excitement, and tends to be expensive to carry out.² William Newell on his part has argued that interdisciplinary studies draws insights from different disciplines to strengthen the capacity to solve problems, promotes pedagogical practice by giving students opportunities to learn from other disciplines. When it works well it promotes greater thinking and disciplinary maturity. It is good for careers since employers seek multi-talented individuals.³ A.F. Repko has described interdisciplinary research as a way “of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline and draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights to produce a more comprehensive understanding or cognitive advancement”.⁴

1 For discussion of J.T. Klein and W.G. Doty, eds., *Interdisciplinary Studies Today* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1994); W.H. Newell, ed. *Interdisciplinarity: Essays from the Literature*, (New York, N.Y.: College Entrance Examination Board, 1998); K.M. Sullivan, “Forward: Interdisciplinarity,” *Migration Law Review* 100, no. 6 (2002): 1217–1226; R. Schleifer, “Disciplinarity and Collaboration in the Sciences and Humanities,” *College English* 59, no. 4 (1997): 438–452.

2 Thomas Benson, “Five Arguments against Interdisciplinary Studies,” in *Interdisciplinarity: Essays from the Literature* (ed. W.H. Newell; New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1998), 103–108.

3 William Newell, “The Case for Interdisciplinary Studies: Response to Professor Benson’s Five Arguments,” in *Interdisciplinarity: Essays from the Literature* (ed. W.H. Newell; New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1998), 109–122.

4 A.F. Repko. *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage, 2008), 12.

In African Studies, interdisciplinarity has contributed materials for some of the most contested topics such as race, intellectual development, and the very idea of civilisation. Interdisciplinarity has led to intellectual projects in which the scholars have drawn ideas from different disciplines. Scholars engaged in this enterprise have familiarised themselves with the key terms and ideas from other disciplines. The familiarisation could be seen as a hermeneutical project, which involves the understanding of the language of other disciplines. This entails a careful translation. Jim Cochrane argues: “there exists at the heart of all translation an aporia that goes well beyond linguistic and semantic matters. The aporia lies in the tension between welcoming the other and colonising or doing violence to the other.”⁵ Thus, translation calls for awareness that one has a responsibility to understand all sides, keeping in mind that one cannot translate everything because some things remain un-translated from one discipline to the other and therefore invites greater understanding and patience from the scholar who has entered a different conceptual world. Interdisciplinarity sometimes does not offer all the tools and scholars have increasingly thought of and carried research using transdisciplinary methods.

Paul T. Zeleza has argued that scholars use different metaphors to describe this approach to research. First geographical metaphors refer to boundaries, fields, turf, as places that interdisciplinary scholars seek to cross, annex, or colonise.⁶ Here territorial terms refer to disciplines as immobile structures while the metaphor of river, current, or flow is used to describe interdisciplinary as moving between disciplines.⁷ The metaphor of language compares interdisciplinary work to learning a new language. Some use the metaphor of marriage to describe the complementarity that interdisciplinarity brings to research. Zeleza argues that disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity “are mutually constitutive: the latter entails, indeed requires, the existence of the former.”⁸ One has to know what the disciplines are, and furthermore, disciplinary scholarship is the basis for interdisciplinary studies.⁹

5 James R. Cochrane, “The Language that Difference Makes: Translating Religion and Health,” *Practical Matters* 4 (2011): 5–6. See Paul Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just* (trans. David Pellauer; Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 107–120.

6 Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “The Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions of African Studies,” *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity* 1, no. 2 (2006), 198.

7 Zeleza, “Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions,” 198.

8 Zeleza, “Disciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Global Dimensions,” 198.

9 L. Hunt, “The Virtues of Interdisciplinarity,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 28, no. 1 (1994): 1–7.

Interdisciplinarity as an idea and an intellectual practice is not new in African Studies. Christopher Fyfe gave an account of interdisciplinary African Studies in his book, *African Studies since 1945*.¹⁰ In *Africa and the Disciplines*, the authors demonstrated in a convincing manner that interdisciplinary studies have shaped African Studies, especially in the social sciences and the humanities.¹¹ Social science disciplines like history, economics, had a wide impact in their fields and development studies, dependency theory and its demise, revolutionary activities of peasants, state structures and crisis, and economic adjustment. A field like anthropology has affected and produced major works on nearly all the disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities in African studies. In the humanities, Africanists H.G. Martin and M.O. West edited *Out of One, Many Africans*, which also discussed interdisciplinarity in African Studies.¹² In an earlier essay, they predicted the end of African Studies, arguing that in the twenty first century scholars would have to rethink and resurrect the idea of African Studies in a new post-Africanist era marked by the end of the Cold War, dwindling resources, and shifting interests.¹³ Martin and West argue that the account that African Studies started with Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University in 1948 and ten years later the formation of the ASA, was accepted as if this was the whole story. This was not the case because this account ignored “the missionary roots of current scholarship.”¹⁴ The account also ignored the work of African American scholars and other black scholars in the diaspora whose work was central to the development of Pan African thought that span the periods from the “American, French, and Haitian revolutions” and that produced ethnographic and historical works. In the USA a new breed of scholars emerged, with many of them teaching at black universities who contributed to the study of black life in the US and Africa. These groups of scholars called “vindicationists” made up of a social and diverse intellectual pool brought a transnational and transcontinental perspective to the study of Africa.¹⁵

10 Christopher Fyfe, *African Studies since 1945* (London: Longman, 1976).

11 Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, eds. *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

12 W.G. Martin and M.O. West, eds., *Out of One, Many Africans: Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

13 W.G. Martin and M.O. West, “A Future with a Past: Resurrecting the Study of Africa in the Post-Africanist Era,” *Africa Today* 44, no. 3 (1997): 309–326.

14 Martin and West, *Out of One*, 310–311.

15 Martin and West, *Out of One*, 311.

Following World War II African Studies emerged into a new world in which the USA emerged as a major influence in a world in which colonialism was ending and the Cold War was gaining strength. In that context, area studies became a reality, and were funded in part by the United States government, private foundations, and some academic institutions all in a bid to get “trusted scholars” in an age of suspicion. The new context for African Studies displaced old colonial, missionary influence, and earlier Pan Africanist models. They even noted that Herskovits boasted about helping to defund “negrophile” W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Encyclopedia Africana* “project.”¹⁶ The new approaches severed links between Africa and the Americas, a move that they argue “permitted Africa” to be removed from concerns with racial oppression, issues that were relegated to the field of American “race relations.”¹⁷ Resources and personal including oversees students were shifted to mostly white institutions, and many African Americans and Caribbeans of African descent were excluded from the emerging discipline of African Studies. This arrangement faced challenges from several quarters and in 1969, there was an attempt to take over African Studies at the Montreal annual meeting.

New challenges that emerged included the dominance of disciplines, growing focus on the global instead of area studies even though the President of the Social Science Research Council deemed African Studies one of the most successful. Martin and West argue that it is important to rethink African Studies by challenging its intellectual narrowness to address the challenge posed by globalisation. Rather than depend on state and capitalist institutions, scholars could think of working with predominantly black institutions and to do that they should increase black representation in the African Studies Association. They are critical of present attempts to focus more on empowerment programs through non-governmental organisations like the Africa Summit. These efforts have not included grassroots organisations that have kept the interest of Africa alive in the USA. The authors argue that one of the best ways forward is to build on new perspectives that bring together the study of Africa and the African diaspora such as Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*.¹⁸

The one example of interdisciplinary studies in Africa is clearly Cheikh Anta Diop, who through his intellectual life studied the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences. Scholars have known Diop as a scholar of Egyptology and African civilisation, but he was much more than that because he

16 Martin and West, *Out of One*, 313.

17 Martin and West, *Out of One*, 313.

18 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

employed transdisciplinary research to study Africa, an approach that enabled him to champion African civilisation in the wake of European dismissal of the idea in Africa. On different level of scholarly engagement, Diop employed transdisciplinary methods to shed light and open new research questions. For example, he employed the melanin test in his studies of phenotype to determine the skin colour of ancient Egyptians. Further social analysis led Diop to develop his two-cradle theory about human civilisations. Diop also approached his studies of African civilisations, culture, and political systems from a multidisciplinary perspective.¹⁹ Dani Wadada Nabudere has argued that since multidisciplinary tends to proceed in a manner that privileges a home discipline, it sometimes does not always allow scholars to present balanced arguments. Therefore, transdisciplinarity in the manner which Cheikh Anta Diop practiced, offers rich possibilities for intellectual research and dialogue.²⁰

Three reference points to the benefits and outcomes mark transdisciplinarity; the first involves the application of methods from one discipline to another and the example given in Nabudere is transferring methodological approaches from nuclear physics to medicine to fine new therapies. The second deals with the establishment of epistemological flexibility allowing theories and ideas from one discipline to illuminate and provide new understanding in other discipline. Here a good example is the application of the rules of logic from philosophy in jurisprudence. Third, one outcome of transdisciplinarity is the creation of new disciplines. The example given by scholars involves using mathematical formulas and calculations in meteorological studies.²¹

19 See Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth and Reality* (trans. and ed. M. Cook; New York, N.Y.: Lawrence Hill, 1974); Cheikh Anta Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa* (New York, N.Y.: Lawrence Hill, 1974); Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilisation or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology* (trans. Y.L. Ngemi; New York, N.Y.: Lawrence Hill, 1981); Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and of Patriarchy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Karnak House, 1989). See also studies analysing the interdisciplinary nature of the work of Diop which I have drawn from for this section, including J.G. Spady, "The Changing Perception of C.A. Diop and His Work: The Preeminence of a Scientific Spirit," in *The Great African Thinkers, Vol. 1, Cheikh Anta Diop* (ed. Ivan Van Sertima; New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 89–10; Dani Wadada Nabudere, "Cheikh Anta Diop: The Social Sciences, Humanities, Physical and Natural Sciences and Transdisciplinarity," *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 2 no. 1 (July, 2007): 6–34.

20 Nabudere, *Cheikh Anta Diop*, 24.

21 B. Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* (trans. K.C. Voss; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002). The summaries used here are taken from Nabudere, *Cheikh Anta Diop*, 24.

The other level at which transdisciplinary works in African Studies, is at the meta-critical level. Here scholars are engaged in the discourse on Africa, with the main task being to understand and respond to what others have thought and said of Africa, and in doing so they open new lines of inquiry. This intellectual enterprise can best be described or understood from the theoretical orientation which has been articulated by scholars engaged in the critical interrogation of systems of knowledge and the world those systems have created, of which a leading voice is Michel Foucault. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault dismissed the notion that the sciences have developed in a neutral value or a free manner or followed “the order of things” as many would have us believe.²² In his analysis of medicine, sexuality, discipline, ethics, and politics, Foucault opened the social, cultural, and political motivations which have driven knowledge formation and power structures. In African Studies, V.Y. Mudimbe employed this mode of critique to develop an archaeology of the gnosis on Africa and the African *pris de parole*.²³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, Achille Mbembe, Dismas Masolo, Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, Elias Bongmba, James Cochrane, and Paul Zeleza, have also studied Africa from interdisciplinary perspectives. These meta-critical analyses of Africa have shaped my own theological perspective and analysis of Africa.²⁴ While there is a general recognition that multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to understanding Africa are important, it seems as if theology continues to be a problematic discipline for some scholars, despite the contribution that theologians have made in the understanding of Africa as Mudimbe demonstrates.²⁵

22 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (trans. Alan Sheridan; New York, N.Y.: Random House, 1970.)

23 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988); See also V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994); Paul T. Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997); P.T. Zeleza, and A. Olukoshi, eds., *African Universities in the Twenty-First Century*, 2 vols. (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004).

24 Elias K. Bongmba, *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

25 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*; V.Y. Mudimbe, *Parable and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); See also Jane I. Guyer, with the assistance of A.M. Virmani and A. Kemp, *African Studies in the United States: A Perspective* (Atlanta, Ga.: African Studies Association Press, 1996).

2 Religion and Theology in African Studies

Religion and especially its sub-discipline, theology, remains one of the major fields of studies in African Studies. Many Africanists in the social sciences beginning with the early anthropologists have devoted enormous time studying religion in Africa. V.Y. Mudimbe has outlined the history of theological discourse in Africa as part of the African *prise de parole* to European discourses on Africa and a critique of religion as a political performance.²⁶ Zeleza included a chapter in his analysis of disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies of Africa.²⁷ The growth of Pentecostalism has generated new interdisciplinary studies of religion in Africa.

Yet, it also evident that the research that is done by scholars of religion – that is the scholars trained in religious studies departments, divinity schools, and the research done by theologians has taken a back seat in African Studies. One of the main concerns to the founders of African Studies, I was told at a conference in Houston, was to make sure that missionaries did not dominate the association with their religious ideology. I can understand that concern, but I also wonder if the missionary and theologian or a scholar of religion trained in a religious studies department or divinity school all belong to one category as those who should not be part of an academic association, or publish in its journals. I find such a position untenable. Some of the missionaries who worked in Africa were actually intellectuals and academics. There is no doubt that in many contexts, the most important criterion for mission service was a conversion experience, but after what some would consider a long time, candidates for missionary assignment were highly educated individuals.²⁸ Adrian Hastings in his analysis of the Victorian missionary has pointed out that with time highly educated individuals joined the missionary force.

Livingstone and Colenso remain the intellectual princes of the nineteenth-century missionary movement ... Men like Adams, Stewart, Laws, Johnson, were less intellectually flamboyant and individualist, but they

26 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*.

27 Elias K. Bongmba, "The Study of African Religions: A Sketch of the Past and Prospects for the Future," in *The Study of Africa, Vol. 1: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters* (ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza; Dakar: CODESRIA, 2006), 338–374.

28 Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 18–20.

and many others were people of considerable education, intelligence, and imaginative judgment.²⁹

Later missionaries like Hastings himself, Bengt Sundkler, and David Barrett were instrumental in shaping discourses on Christianity and the growth of Christian independency.³⁰ One of the most discussed works in African Studies is *Bantu Philosophy*, by the Belgian missionary who worked in the Congo, Placide Tempels.³¹

It is important to demonstrate the growing disquiet about theology even from studies that focus on religion in the African context. Some scholars have recently started to criticise the work done by members of the circle not on terms of their arguments, but for other reasons.³² Rejecting theological arguments in African Studies is not new. It is a legacy of colonial anthropology.³³ Evans-Pritchard published “Zande theology” (ZT) in *Sudan Notes and Records* in 1936, one year before *Witchcraft, Oracles, Magic among the Azande*.³⁴ He rejected the notion of a Zande theology and criticised Monsignor Lagae’s *Les Azande*, and Captain J.E.T. Philipps, because both of them portrayed “a personal God, kindly creator and father, moral ruler and judge of the universe, to whom men pray in humility and in faith”.³⁵ Even though Evans-Pritchard acknowledged Zande

29 Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa: 1450–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 265.

30 Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); David Barrett, *Schism and Renewal* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968).

31 Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1969).

32 For example Jane E. Soothill in her wonderful book, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana*, criticises African women theologians in a move which I think demonstrate more the rejection of African theology as a discipline than on substantive issues. See Jane E. Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana* (Studies of Religion in Africa 30; Leiden: Brill, 2007).

33 See Elias K. Bongmba, “Evans-Pritchard on Zande Theology,” unpublished paper presented at the Joint Colloquium on Evans-Pritchard’s Anthropology: English Contexts, French Perspectives, African Realities, at the Institute of Social & Cultural Anthropology, British Centre for Durkheimian Studies, La Maison Française.

34 Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, “Zande Theology,” in *Sudan Notes & Records*, Volume XIX Part 1 (1936): 1–48. See also idem, *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1964), 288–329.

35 Evans-Pritchard, “Zande Theology,” 1–2. See Mgr. C.R. Lagae, *Les Azande ou Niam-Niam: l’organisation Zande, croyances religieuses et magiques, coutumes familiales* (Bibliothèque-Congo 18; Bruxelles: Vromant, 1926); Captain J.E.T. Philipps, M.C., “Observations on Some

belief in *Mboli*, a Supreme Being, he argued that Zande views of a Supreme Being could not be taken seriously because there were differences resulting from the impreciseness of the data.³⁶ Beliefs were not expressed in precise rituals. The Zande people had no shrines, and that there was only one public ceremony dedicated to the worship of *Mboli*, the Supreme Being. Evans-Pritchard concluded that the Zande have no concept of a God who takes an ever-present interest in the world, rewards good and evil, guards the moral law, or one who is omnipotent, omnipresent, benevolent, personal, and a monotheistic being.³⁷

Michael Singleton also rejected the view that there is a Zande theology.³⁸ He argued that the thoughts of so-called “primitive” people are on a different level of experience. Evans-Pritchard pointed out that Zande express their thoughts in terms of

actual and particular situations ... Azande experience feelings about witchcraft rather than ideas, for their intellectual concepts of it are weak and they know better what to do when attacked by it than how to explain it. Their response is action and not analysis ... we have to be careful to avoid, in the absence of native doctrine, constructing a dogma which we would formulate were we to act as Azande do.³⁹

Singleton thought in discussing groups like Azande, words like “mentality” and outlook should be used instead of technical terminology like “theology” and “philosophy.”

Aspects of Religion Among the Azande (Niam-Niam) of Equatorial Africa,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 56 (1926): 171–187.

36 Evans-Pritchard, “Zande Theology,” 6.

37 Evans-Pritchard, “Zande Theology,” 10.

38 Michael Singleton, “Theology, ‘Zande Theology’ and Secular Theology” in *Zande Themes: Essays Presented to Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard* (eds. André Singer and Brian V. Street; Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), 131.

39 Singleton, *Zande Themes*, 131–132. Other scholars shared Evans-Pritchard’s conviction that Zande thought was unsystematic, a view that was shared widely. Godfrey Lienhardt expressed similar concerns about the Shilluk people of South Sudan, see R. Godfrey Lienhardt, “Modes of Thought,” in *The Institutions of Primitive Society: A Series of Broadcast Talks* (E.E. Evans-Pritchard, et al.; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), 101–102; Malinowski said a similar thing when he said: “language in its primitive forms ought to be regarded and studied against the background of human activities and as a mode of human behavior in practical matters ... language originally among primitive, non-civilised peoples was never used as a mere mirror of reflected thought ... it is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection,” B. Malinowski, cited in Singleton, *Zande Themes*, 138.

However, in *Nuer Religion* Evans-Pritchard assessed local religion in a very different manner. In the conclusion of that book he suggested that it would be necessary for someone to undertake a systematic philosophy of other societies and classifying their chief characteristics and features.⁴⁰ Such a study would demonstrate that there might be one or two dominant motifs around which the thought of the people is centred.⁴¹ Evans-Pritchard reported that the Nuer people affirm: "God is so great, so good."⁴² They also affirmed that if one has not done anything wrong something would not happen. However, if something happened that they could not explain or attribute to someone, they accepted it because it must have been the will of God. Beyond other abstract considerations, the relationship between God and humanity was a concrete reality, and the task of the anthropologists was to trace meanings and not decide if they are right or wrong.⁴³ I see no contradiction in Evans-Pritchard when he borrowed categories from the West to describe Nuer religion. The outcome of that exercise is a rich text, which gives the reader a complex picture of Nuer beliefs, something that is missing when he assessed Zande materials.⁴⁴ He argued: "The Nuer are undoubtedly a primitive people by the usual standards of reckoning, [maybe as the Zande are] but their religious thought is remarkably sensitive, refined, and intelligent. It is also highly complex."⁴⁵ Later on, he wrote approvingly of Nuer sense of fear, describing it as awe; an emotion he dismissed twenty years earlier among the Zande. Evans-Pritchard then argued that anthropologists ought to move away from dependence on sociological and psychological theories to explain religious phenomena. The new tool that would enable anthropologists do this was "primitive philosophy", and he explained that by "philosophy," he meant *Weltanschauung*. His goal in writing the book was to contribute to the

classification of African philosophies ... the philosophy of each has its own special character in virtue of the way in which among that people these ideas are related to one another ... among others such as the Nuer,

40 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

41 Mary Douglas argued that Evans-Pritchard engaged in theological construction when he wrote *Nuer Religion*. See Mary Douglas, *Edward Evans-Pritchard* (New York, N.Y.: The Viking Press, 1980), 90–91.

42 See Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 317, 206.

43 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 317, 206.

44 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 120–121.

45 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 311.

Spirit is in the center of the picture and manistic and witchcraft ideas are peripheral ...

Nuer philosophy is, as we have seen, essentially of a religious kind, and is dominated by the idea of *kwoth*, Spirit.⁴⁶

3 Interdisciplinarity Invites a Rethinking of Theology and Sciences

In his 1959 Huxley Memorial Lecture, Raymond Firth made what one could consider today a call for interdisciplinary studies between theology and anthropology when he argued that Thomas Huxley contributed to anthropology through his treatment of religion.

He [Huxley] regarded the study of the spirit entities broadly falling under the head of theology as legitimately coming within the province of anthropology ... He noted that “the characteristics of the gods in Tongan theology are exactly those of men whose shape they are pleased to possess, only they have more intelligence and greater power.”⁴⁷

However, as Firth pointed out, Huxley had a rationalist bent and suggested that where religious “symbols are dealt with as real incidents, and are converted into dogmatic ideals, men of science have a duty to show that they have no greater values than the fabrications of men’s hands, the sticks and stones which they have replaced.”⁴⁸ Huxley went on to promote agnosticism and influence Darwin.

Firth argued that the climate for religious studies has shifted “from literal to symbolic and functional interpretations of religious phenomena and the open acceptance of non-rational and irrational alongside rational components in the data of human personality ... One important concomitant of this has been the development among anthropologists of a more sympathetic attitude towards religious material in the societies they study.”⁴⁹ Firth argued that Lévy-Bruhl later abandoned his ideas on primitive mentality and argued that primitives

46 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 314–315.

47 Raymond Firth, “Problem and Assumption in an Anthropological Study of Religion,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 89, no. 2 (Jul–Dec. 1959): 129.

48 Firth, “Problem and Assumption.”

49 Firth, “Problem and Assumption,” 130.

share many things in common with the civilised, including the mystical view of the world; a move which made some anthropologists to see the symbolic world of others as “common themes in symbolic statement – forms alternative to, even if simpler than those in the more widely known ‘great’ religions.”⁵⁰ According to Firth, the common features of religion call for a pluralistic analysis of religious data.

One implication from this realignment, too little perceived as yet by anthropologists, is that we can no longer afford to neglect the more professional theoretical analysis of religion ... not only by sociologists, with whom we have kept in comparative general touch, but also by psychologists, historians, philosophers, theologians, and other students of comparative religion, some of whom have displayed a growing sociological awareness.⁵¹

Edith Turner has argued that anthropologists and theologians ought to seek to understand one another. She redefines theology as “the study of all spirit beings and gods (as Hindu theology indeed does), and include an array of beings distinct from the Christian God.” Turner decries the motivation for studying a people’s beliefs in order to evangelise them as the Pope has urged Catholics to do in some instances.⁵² Turner adds that anthropologists often encounter symbols that deal with the mysterious and it is possible that their work could “restore faith in a rationalistic church – and that of other religions too – in the experience of the people.”⁵³ It is interesting that while calling for dialogue Turner dismisses liberation theology rather prematurely. “This ‘theology’ is not theology at all, but the necessary and praiseworthy widening of moral responsibility for the poor and disenfranchised of the world.”⁵⁴ Such a position reflects Turner’s commitment to so-called classical theology even though the rules of theological construction have shifted significantly during the second half of the previous century, and those changes have certainly made liberation theology a legitimate theological enterprise.

50 Firth, “Problem and Assumption,” 130.

51 Firth, “Problem and Assumption,” 130–131.

52 See Gerald Arbuckle, S.M. “Theology and Anthropology: Time for Dialogue,” *Theological Studies* (1986): 428–447.

53 Edith Turner, “Theology and the Anthropological Study of Spirit Events in an Iñupiat Village,” in *Explorations in Anthropology and Theology* (eds. Frank A. Salamone and Walter Randolph Adams; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997), 70.

54 Turner, “Theology and the Anthropological Study,” 68–69.

Turner proposes that anthropologists and theologians might find common ground through a reflection on humanism and ethics that comes from honouring religious views from different traditions. Such thought and theology would certainly be different from a theology that is constructed in the ivory tower of academia, but it could deal with mundane existence and it would always be in process.⁵⁵ “We can put ourselves in the service of the planet – the way it is, not the way it ought to be.”⁵⁶ Anthropology provides caveats for religion (and theologians) through its studies of indigenous religiosity. These caveats include extensive studies of ritual. The spirituality of the village emphasises respecting the work and importance of shamans. In this regard, the focus is not going to be on the reality of what is observed.

Often the statement is made by anthropologists that the issue of the reality of the claims is unimportant, for the work of anthropologists is the interpretation of symbols. However, interpretation in that sense fails to grasp what it might feel like to experience ghosts or have pain actually taken out of one’s body.⁵⁷

I am sympathetic to the proposals Turner makes that both anthropology and theology could engage in fruitful reflections on humanism and ethics. To do this, it is important that scholars of both disciplines continue to interpret symbols, construed as broadly as possible, which Firth once described as a device for abstraction, and for “communication of knowledge and control”.⁵⁸ Together, anthropologists and theologians could realise what Victor Turner said about the symbols we work with.

Symbols are multivocal, manipulable, and ambiguous precisely because they are initially located in systems, classified, or arranged in a regular, orderly form. Complex urbanised societies have generated classes of literate specialists, intellectuals of various kinds, including cultural anthropologists, whose paid business, under the division of labor, is to devise logical plans, order concepts into related series, establish taxonomic hierarchies, denature ritual by *theologising* it, freeze thought into philosophy, and impose the grid of law on custom.⁵⁹

55 Turner, “Theology and the Anthropological Study,” 71.

56 Turner, “Theology and the Anthropological Study,” 68–69.

57 Turner, “Theology and the Anthropological Study,” 74.

58 Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), 24, 76.

59 Victor Turner, “Symbolic Studies,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 4 (1995): 146.

Some theologians have engaged in interdisciplinary studies because they have used philosophy and insights from some of the social sciences and need to embrace the new concerns for interdisciplinarity. Those engaged in theology today need to recognize, as Catherine Odora Hoppers has pointed out, that an interdisciplinary approach at the level of application calls for the transfer or appropriation of methods used in other disciplines to resolve issues on other disciplines.⁶⁰ This does not call for the disappearance of disciplines because one's research still remains within a discipline, but the idea here is that the research is informed and enriched by what takes place in other disciplines and theology is no exception as contemporary theological research demonstrates.

There is evidence that a critical dialogue is growing in this direction if one thinks of the work of Jean and John Comaroff. Their planned trilogy, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, probes missionary archives in order to interpret the missionary's message and praxis as a conflictual and totalising proclamation. However, the dominated Tshidi Tswanas also appropriated missionary symbols and part of their logic to mount an emancipatory engagement in a house that Christianity and civilisation built. While the debate about the Comaroff's own logic and strategy continues, I must say that some South African theologians have found resonance with their anthropological reading of missionary praxis.⁶¹ The Comaroffs remind the anthropologists and missiologists of the dangers of the wrongful use of theology. Their project does not engage in any denial of Western theological categories, nor do they deny African theological categories. They decry the misuse of those categories in a process that marginalised others, and they show how those marginalised have appropriated liberating dimensions of theology to fight their cause. Their approach is one model that indicates that a fruitful and critical dialogue must be maintained between anthropology and theology.

Interdisciplinarity that includes theology today calls for critical dialogue between the disciplines. The broad assumptions of interdisciplinary studies are that each participant in interdisciplinary dialogue would engage in a scien-

60 Catherine A. Odora Hoppers, "Center for African Renaissance Studies, the Academy, the State and Civil Society: Methodological Implications of Transdisciplinarity and the African Perspective," *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2006): 7–32.

61 See Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. One (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, Vol. Two (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1997). See also Elias K. Bongmba, *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2006).

tific activity that is also always a provisional enterprise.⁶² In this sense, critical theology works with language in different contexts and follows logical analysis that is open to scrutiny by scholars from other disciplines.⁶³ Theologians in Africa need to expand their language in a spirit of interdisciplinary dialogue to include the critical deployment of the language of other disciplines. The work of scholars like Alexis Kagame should command new critical appreciation.⁶⁴ Second, theology is contextual activity in which theological questions probe the religious and theoretical concerns of a specific location, situation, social location, or cultural context.⁶⁵ Richard Bernstein calls for dialogical communities, where debates and development in the discipline can take place.⁶⁶ In such a community, the language of theology should be critical, open, and pluralistic. Third, theology is as temporal and provisional an activity as other disciplines and from this view is *Grenzwissenschaft*.⁶⁷ Theology must be radically humanised as practitioners recognise the conceptual limitations they bring to the discourse.⁶⁸ Finally, theology as other disciplines remains an

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- 62 I have made some of these arguments elsewhere. See Elias K. Bongmba, "African Theology and the Question of Rationality," in *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology* (ed. Edward P. Antonio; New York, N.Y.: Peter Lang, 2006), 241–266.
- 63 Pieter J.J. Botha highlights the reality of non-foundational thinking, Pieter J.J. Botha, "Theology after Babel: Pluralism and Religious Discourse," in *The Relevance of Theology for the 1990s* (eds. J. Mouton and B.C. Latagan; Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1994), 42. See M. Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (New York, N.Y.: Meridian, 1980).
- 64 James Cochrane points out that theologians work within a horizon, patterns of significance, which "communicates through shared images and forms, and thus established community. The theological method should enable the scholar to explore competing claims as well as perspectives from other disciplines," James Cochrane, "Resistance, Reconstruction, and Theology: Truth and Method in Question and Under Fire," in *The Relevance of Theology for the 1990s* (eds. J. Mouton and B.C. Latagan; Pretoria, South Africa: Human Sciences Research Council, 1994), 59–82.
- 65 David Tracy, "Comparative Theology," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 14 (ed. Mircea Eliade; New York, N.Y.: Macmillan, 1987), 446–455.
- 66 Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 230.
- 67 I have taken this formulation from Johannes Fabian who has called anthropology a *Grenzwissenschaft*. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, N.Y.; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1983).
- 68 Writing about Christian theology, Tillich pointed out: "One of the basic Christian truths to which theology must witness is that theology itself, like every human activity, is subject to the contradictions of man's existential situation." Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 54.

intersubjective enterprise through which the scholar engages not only the ideas of others, but a view of the world as seen through other disciplines.

I must observe that there is no reason for scholars of other disciplines to think that African theology will always be confessional thought. Liberation theology demonstrated that practitioners could open up theological claims to scrutiny by applying social analysis. In the current context, scholars engaged in an analysis of such a worldview and its religious and theological dimensions, cannot but notice that the belief in such forces does not hold a monopoly on knowledge. There are other valid perspectives on what we know about the world and how we acquire that knowledge. When one considers the current climate in African studies where the ethnographic idea has contributed significantly to the large amount of literature in different fields it is important that we rethink the position of theology and its relationship to other disciplines. The concern for me in African Studies is not the absence of religion as such, but the disdain which Africanists show towards theology as a sub-discipline of religion. The growing interest in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies calls for collaborative research which has seen new approaches in the African context through research on health issues.

4 Interdisciplinarity in Religion, Theology, and Science

One area in which interdisciplinarity lags behind in religion and theology in the African context is the area of science. Even after many decades of the social scientific study of religion, there are still lingering questions about that relationship. The relationship is more a matter of concern for theology whose practitioners today protest the marginalisation of their discipline even within some circles in the American Academy of Religion. The view that theology is just critical reflection on the faith and that the idea of critical study sets it aside as a rational and scientifically oriented quest for knowledge is no longer enough for interdisciplinary purposes. For theology, it is safe to say that while great progress has been made, more could and should be done to encourage a fruitful dialogue.⁶⁹ This is important in the African context where there is

69 I do not want to give anyone the impression that in religious studies and theology there has been no emphasis on interdisciplinary studies. For as long as one can remember, religious studies and the theology have collaborated with philosophy. For most of the 20th century religious studies and theology have drawn enrichment from many disciplines in the social sciences. One of the driving forces for creative theological reflection that has come to be known as liberation theology was insights from Marxist thought accessed through

still a great need to promote the study of science. The politics of knowledge and the ideological orientation in science and theology have made scholars hold on to what one might call an inviolable space where their disciplines rule supreme or are thought to be sacred and cannot be contaminated. Yet we are also painfully aware of the fact that such compartmentalisation is no longer tenable in a context where both theology and science continue to clamour for attention in the African context.⁷⁰

The doubts often expressed by some in the African context is that a scientific worldview militates against the view that some intelligent being created the universe and is responsible for keeping it. Religious beliefs are not always open to scrutiny as scientific ideas are because the religious statements are statements of faith. Others worry that rejecting the idea of divine creation of the universe secularises society. Secularisation is a complex term, whose full meaning can be appreciated if we rethink the sacred. If the sacred is grounded mainly in the idea of a sacred being, then one could claim that imposing a non-divine view of origins and the outworking of the universe would compromise the idea of the sacred and impose a secular outlook. That is not the case because even the idea of sacred need not be understood in light of a personal power behind the universe.

For some, the debate about theology and science is not only about origins, but involves other challenges about being part of the universe. Some worry that a purely scientific outlook and excessive exploration has contributed to our problems with the environment and rather than solve those problems it has created our dependence on science and a mechanistic view of the universe. We have lost local views on how we can sustain the universe for future posterity. Some argue that for people in Africa, Western scientific domination has destroyed the local views and practices that kept the universe intact before modern discoveries accelerated consumption and destruction.⁷¹ While we cannot reject these ideas completely, reversing these setbacks calls for new and efficient technologies. The struggle for environmental justice will require

different disciplines in the social sciences. It is customary these days to talk of sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, psychology of religion, as we have been accustomed to saying philosophy of religion. The idea of science and religion has also been around for a while, but is experiencing a renaissance as scholars in religious studies continue to map out the connections and differences between religion and science.

70 Repko, *Interdisciplinary Research*, 1–48; John A. Grim, “Indigenous Lifeways and Knowing the World,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (eds. Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson; Oxford; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–34.

71 Grim, “Indigenous Lifeways and Knowing the World,” 1–34.

more than spiritual weapons. Scientific research could provide new tools and knowledge that would lead to the development of new plant species, food, or manufacturing environmentally friendly tools and consumer products. They could help people recover what is already damaged. For example, Africa faces a number of challenges with the environment that has caused significant food shortages. The Sahel region of Africa and areas with massive deserts pose great challenges to food and water security. Theologians and religious communities could contribute to the search for sustainable ways of sharing the universe through interdisciplinary research.

Several years ago, Zimbabwean Independent Churches embarked on ecological renewal that called for planting trees as a way of fighting climate change. This was a theological vision that assigned the origins of the universe to a maker, but also opened a scientific worldview that should promote environmental responsibility.⁷² Promoting projects like, irrigation, water conservation, land fallowing, the planting of trees, and vegetation, it is important for researchers in different fields to recognise that a new scientific approach could point the way forward into the future. Given the crisis of food production, especially in draught prone areas of the Sahel, Ethiopia, and the areas where deserts continue to encroach on farmland, theologians and scientists could study and encourage the use of genetically modified seeds that have a high yield potential and uses less arable land surfaces.

My argument here is that we need not dwell on explaining origins from a mystical perspective because the scientific outlook of the world provides a richer explanation of origins and the way things work, while the religious imagination reflects a faith statement that provides meaning, but is not demonstrable as one could do with scientific data. Recently, Kwame Gyekye inquired into the relationship between science and religion arguing that the development of a theoretical perspective on science that allowed people to pursue knowledge for knowledge sake has generated a long history of abstraction and openness in scientific inquiry as opposed to personal knowledge pursuit or secrecy in some knowledge systems in Africa. One of the persons cited for seeking to bridge this gap is Byamungu lua Lufungula, a pharmacist in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who makes medicines, taking into consideration local beliefs.⁷³

72 M.L. Daneel, *African Earthkeepers Vol. 2: Environmental Mission and Liberation in Christian Perspective* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 1999).

73 Steven Feierman and John M. Janzen, "African Religions," in *Science and Religion Around the World* (eds. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L. Numbers; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2011), 245.

5 Interdisciplinarity: Theology – Health Care

The relationship between religion, health, healing, and well-being calls for careful interdisciplinary studies because members of some religious communities promote faith healing at the expense of medical treatment. In some communities in Africa, ministers emphasise that only prayer can heal or cure any disease. Christians are encouraged to fast and pray and very little emphasis is placed on seeking appropriate medical help. People give special offerings as part of their quest for healing. People also attend night vigils and attend healing conferences. In some parts of Africa, people have made special pilgrimages to leading evangelists like T.B. Joshua in Nigeria. Former Zambian president, Frederick Chiluba, also made such a pilgrimage to Nigeria to visit the ministry of T.B. Joshua. Supporters of faith healing argue that people are healed through the power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In addition to denying that such healing takes place, opponents question the methods of diagnosing those illnesses. The debate here is not about religious institutions serving as a health care system; they already provide medical services and at their clinics trained physicians and nurses diagnose the illnesses, prescribe medicines and pharmacists dispense the medicines. Critics of faith healing question the exclusive focus on prayer and fasting as instruments of healing. To insist that the individual should depend only on prayers ignores the role of science in health and healing and promotes a fantasy that does not always work.

Healing practices involve diagnosis, the use of natural, biological materials since illness has natural causes and human bodies respond to natural remedies. Since health and healing in most places respond to and address what happens to the body, what is generally described as biomedical approaches – a scientific approach to health care – does not have a monopoly on the idea of biology, health, and healing.⁷⁴ Elochukwu Uzukwu, argues that in the Igbo world, people say “ife kwulu ife akwudebe ya” (whenever something stands, something else stands beside it), an indication that there is a certain interconnectivity which we can expand conceptually to claim that even ideas and ways of seeing and interpreting the world can be done from different disciplines.⁷⁵ African

74 David Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation. From Spiritual Beings to Living Humans* (Studies on Religion in Africa 28; Leiden; Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2006), 209–215. Also see David Westerlund, “Religion, Illness, and Healing,” in *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions* (ed. E.K. Bongmba; Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 443–456.

75 Elochukwu Uzukwu, *God, Spirit, and Human Wholeness: Appropriating Faith and Culture in West African Style* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 10–12.

worldviews are open to other views of the world. It is perhaps this dimension of so called traditional world view that made Africans open up to new ideas from different parts of the world. Such an openness militates against conceptual absolutism. Scholars and researchers need to demonstrate flexibility that allows theologians to see the world in broad terms; or as Chinua Achebe puts it, to see the world as mask dancing which you must move around to see well.⁷⁶

Those who promote interdisciplinary approaches to health must reject the view that Africans lack scientific approaches to healing. Steven Fiereman and John M. Janzen argue that the word for healing in many Bantu languages come from the root *ganga*, which refers to the idea of a medical specialist.⁷⁷ We can assume that such a specialisation required some kind of systematic knowledge. The term *nganga* used as a prefix refers to a specialist in some profession and in precolonial society knowledge was often associated with empirical and moral imagination: “[The] sharp opposition of science and religion as we know it in the organisation of these fields in the modern university is a reflection of Post-Enlightenment assumptions that thoroughly secularise specialised scientific knowledge.”⁷⁸ Highlighting what they appropriately describe as the interaction between the visible and invisible they argue that even in crafts like iron smelting rituals connected the technical aspects with the symbolic work where power was believed to reside. Symbolic interpretations of the world also played a key role in regulating the environment.

The theological proposition that Jesus is a great physician does not blur the reality that in several African communities illness and healing have a broad social base and people pay attention to the technical aspects of medicine. Fiereman and Janzen point out that the *min'kisi*, (singular *nkisi*) refers to “consecrated medicine,” also called charged objects.⁷⁹ Something is called a *nkisi*, when the *nganga*, employs natural materials – leaves, barks, *et cetera* – and all things that can be put together by the specialist and used for treatment. “Each *nkisi* each consecrated medicine, originated at some time in the past in an individual vision or in a relationship between an individual and a spiritual entity ... [the] elements include recipes of ingredients (*bilongo*), techniques of composition and use, the songs, dances, and words without which its power would not exist, and the prohibition that define proper and improper behavior for the

76 Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 45–46.

77 Feierman and Janzen, “African Religions,” 231.

78 Feierman and Janzen, “African Religions,” 231.

79 Feierman and Janzen, “African Religions,” 235.

person who operates the *nkisi* and the one who is treated with it.”⁸⁰ Feierman and Janzen stress the idea that the *nkisi* is produced and the making of the *nkisi* involves the use of objects, medicinal plants, demonstrating a clear connection to knowledge of the medicinal compounds of different objects. In the case of *nkisi Makongo*, used to treat illnesses related to pneumonia, they argue that in the past, the symbolic aspect of the treatment was carried out by piercing the *nkisi* object with nails on the shoulders, side, and the neck as part of the treatment. However, these days, treatment generally involves the use of “massage and tranquilising medicines to remove the pain or stitch. If these treatments worked, it was confirmed that the case was merely physiological.”⁸¹ The large symbolic part of the *nkisi* indicates that science did not dominate healing, but healing was part the mediation of social, symbolic forces and the sheer knowledge of curative compounds in natural materials which required knowledge indicated a certain scientific activity. Missionaries and colonials ignored this dimension of African healing when they attached the symbolic aspects of healing as pagan activities.

One area where interdisciplinarity has emerged and needs to be encouraged in research on health in African studies during the last 30 years is the struggle against HIV and AIDS. During this period, we have seen studies of health in Africa dominated by the social sciences and the biomedical sciences, although scholars of religion and theologians also engaged in HIV and AIDS research. In the quest for knowledge and of finding ways to contain the spread of the virus and treating those who are affected, scholarship has not always departed from some negative construction of Africa.⁸² Scholars of religion have studied health and recognised the importance of interdisciplinarity. The African Religious Health Assets Program (ARHAP) was launched in Geneva in 2002 to develop knowledge-based health assets as a collaborative research project that would provide useable resources to religious health workers, policy makers, and other stakeholders in public health.⁸³ ARHAP was a collaborative

80 Feierman and Janzen, “African Religions,” 235–236.

81 Steven Feireman and John M. Janzen, “African Religions,” 237–238.

82 Collins Airhibenbuwa, “Framing an African-Centered Discourse on Global Health; Centralising Identity and Culture in Theorising Health Behaviour,” in *The Study of Africa Vol. 1: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters* (ed. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza; Dakar: CODESRIA, 2006), 375–392.

83 I am indebted to James Cochrane, Barbara Schmid and Teresa Cutts for this historical background. See James Cochrane, Barbara Schmid, Teresa Cutts, eds., *When Religion and Health Align: Mobilising Religious Health Assets for Transformation* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2011).

research unlike anything we have seen before because the researchers were not merely responding to the demands of public health when it was facing its greatest challenge from HIV and AIDS, but set out to map out assets in religious communities in Lesotho, Zambia, and South Africa to address public health in Africa and in doing so, the researchers modelled interdisciplinarity.⁸⁴

Central to the ARHAP process was the determination to overcome the communication gap between religion and public health and other disciplines, especially the biomedical sciences.⁸⁵ What was different about ARHAP was the determination of the researchers to cross disciplinary boundaries to draw from “as wide and rich as possible array of intellectual resources and practitioner wisdom, utilising any discipline we could that might be helpful, in order to probe what we originally called a ‘bounded field of unknowing’ – bounded because not everything is fitting to the subject and we have some clues about what is, unknowing because so little has been done or published on religion and public health over the last decades.”⁸⁶ This was not a polite move on the part of the lead researchers because the ideas, the broad questions, and the tools of research were well thought-out. The researchers also recognised that public health has changed significantly and understanding the dynamics of public health can no longer be limited to biomedical research alone, despite the many gains (and I am tempted to say medical “miracles”) researchers in the biomedical sciences have achieved in the twentieth century. Therefore, to get a good picture of religious health assets it was necessary to undertake such a research in an interdisciplinary manner in order to ask relevant questions and gather reliable information about public health, especially in the

84 Jill Olivier, “In Search of Common Ground for Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Communication: Mapping the Cultural Politics of Religion and HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa” (PhD dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2010). Olivier points out that interdisciplinary research groups are found at the University of Cape Town, University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, and at Emory University, the Berkeley Centre for Religion and Peace at Georgetown University, and the Religions and Development Research Programme in the International Development Department at the University of Birmingham in the UK; Olivier, “In Search of Common Ground,” 5.

85 Olivier, “In Search of Common Ground,” 8. See also G. Herdt and S. Lindenbaum, eds., *The Time of AIDS: Social Analysis, Theory, and Method* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

86 Cochrane, Schmid, and Cutts, eds., *When Religion and Health Align*, xxiv. See publications on religion and health, especially Harold G. Koenig, Dana E. King, Verna Benner Carson, eds., *Handbook of Religion and Health* (2nd ed.; New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially its chapter on “A History of Religion, Medicine, and Health Care,” 15–34.

African context where people were and continue to face the greatest health-care challenge in history, namely HIV and AIDS. ARHAP researchers engaged in a phenomenological bracketing of their perception of the role religion plays and decided to engage in a knowledge-based approach to research by mapping religious assets, which religious communities bring to their contribution to healthcare, and they deploy those assets in the fight against diseases. This approach led to what the researchers described as healthworlds, a term that reflects the connectivity of health, and sees it not only as a systematic institution but also as a massive organism made up of different disciplinary contributions.

They ignored negative discourse on health such as “pathology, illness, disease, infection, debilitation, burden, mortality, morbidity, and the causes of death” and considered things that emphasised well-being. This called for a creative use of language and translation of terms from different disciplines and cultures.⁸⁷ The best example of this translation came from their work in Lesotho when they realised that there is no single term for religion and health, but they found the term *bophelo* that expresses a holistic view of health and wellness as well as communicate a relational ontology. As both Cochrane and Olivier point out, translation is challenging because it involves “intellectual, theoretical, practical, and ethical problems”.⁸⁸ Cochrane argues that this painstaking approach to public health and religion is important because of recent problems with the polio vaccine in Nigeria and resolved only when the UN envoy on polio vaccine contacted the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to address false rumours about the effects of the vaccine. With different conceptual tools ARHAP researchers grouped the information into tangible and intangible assets. Tangible referred to facilities, care groups, infrastructure, and campaigns while the intangible referred to trust, compassion, motivation, credibility, ritual, and prayer. But Cochrane points out that the complex real could only be adequately studied when different disciplines worked on the project, a task which called for understanding the language and terms of other disciplines (multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary).⁸⁹

87 Olivier, “In Search of Common Ground,” 2; Cochrane, “The Language that Difference Makes,” 5–6.

88 Cochrane, “The Language that Difference Makes,” 10. See UNAIDS, “Partnership with Faith-Based Organisations: UNAIDS Strategic framework” (Geneva: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2009). I thank Olivier for this reference. See also WHO–CIFA, “NGO mapping” in Olivier, “Search of Common Ground,” 2.

89 See Olivier, “In Search of Common Ground.”

6 At the Table, But Still on the Menu

African theologians recognise that HIV and AIDS demand interdisciplinary research because it involves biomedicine, social, economic, political, and environmental issues that call for a careful attention to ideas from many disciplines. The complexity of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has engaged scholars from different disciplines including but not limited to religion, theology, ethic/bioethics, political science, anthropology, sociology, public health, cultural studies, literary criticism, gender studies, and economics, to name only a few. "Genuine interdisciplinary work requires a ... change in research culture ... [seen] as crucial to understanding the biological, social, and political complexity of HIV/AIDS. Interdisciplinary approaches are required to understand the relationships between the different levels at which HIV/AIDS operates, and to support the development of effective, complex, multi-level, multi-sectoral interventions."⁹⁰ Frank Dimmock has argued that if religious leaders and their communities do not come to the table of dialogue they will end up on the menu.⁹¹ Olivier describes a new polite attitude that pervades public health conferences which are tightly constructed to give the impression that all researchers are welcomed and all can work together.⁹² Yet Olivier is correct in arguing that "being, quite literally, at the table (or on the map) does not mean religious entities will no longer get eaten, since even polite dialogue can be distorted communication that governs what can and cannot be said, or what form collaborations take as a result of these meetings."⁹³ This reality invites genuine interdisciplinary, especially in African studies.

Both Cochrane and Olivier demonstrate the strides that have been made in the last decade to bring multiple voices in dialogue at international meetings like the gigantic AIDS conference sponsored by UNAIDS. In light of these developments "interdisciplinary studies (IDS) are not a passing fad; it is here

90 D. Clarke-Patel, "Forword" in *Learning from HIV and AIDS* (Biosocial Society Symposium Series; eds. G.T.H. Ellison, M. Parker, and C. Campbell; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii.

91 Frank Dimmock and Tali Cassidy, "Maintaining and Strengthening African Religious Health Assets: Challenges facing Christian Health Associations in the Next Decade," in *When Religion and Health Align: Mobilising Religious Health Assets for Transformation* (eds. James R. Cochrane, Barbara Schmid, and Teresa Cutts; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2011).

92 Olivier, "In Search of Common Ground," 177.

93 Olivier, "In Search of Common Ground," 183.

to stay".⁹⁴ In a world where biomedical approaches to health still dominate the discourse on public and global health, it is much easier to tolerate the idea of religion, conceived broadly and as a general term that refers to communities of faith. If we shift the focus from religion and refer to "churches", representatives may be at the table at some meetings but remain on the menu. If the partners are theologians, it might be more difficult to have a dialogue. One gets the impression that theologians remain on the menu even if they are at the table.

Let me illustrate this by making a general claim that while many in African studies welcome interdisciplinary studies, many still think that theology is not one of those disciplines that should be at the table. Other researchers tend to ignore research carried out by scholars of religion and theologians. Even social scientists that have interviewed and carried out surveys in religious communities and talked to religious leaders are hesitant to talk about the theological ideas behind the practices they study so carefully.⁹⁵ I was reminded of the concerns about theological arguments from reviews of my own work. For example, a colleague in African Studies, Professor Olufunke Adebayo, wrote what I thought was a fair and great review of my book, *Facing a Pandemic: The African Church and the Crisis of AIDS*, but in the review, made a remark that that is illustrative of the uncomfortable view of theology in African Studies. Adebayo stated:

Despite the fact that the volume adopts a largely theological cum ethical perspective, it is also conversant with some of the other arguments in the general HIV/AIDS discourse – biomedical, economic, political, philosophical, and social. Another strong feature of the work is that it situates the African AIDS crisis within the global AIDS pandemic and shows what should constitute an appropriate response from the African Christian community to those global trends. Again, the sociopolitical context within which the church operates is discussed and the need for networking with others in the anti-AIDS arena emphasised.⁹⁶

94 Repko, *Interdisciplinary Research*, 332.

95 See the few references of theology on works on HIV and AIDS in Africa in Felicitas Becker and P. Wenzel Geissler, eds., *Aids and Religions Practice in Africa* (Studies of Religion in Africa 36; Leiden, Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2009); Gregory Barz, *Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda* (New York, N.Y.; Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); See also Gregory Barz and Judah M. Cohen, eds., *The Culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and Healing Through Music and the Arts* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2011).

96 Olufunke Adebayo, review of Elias Kifon Bongmba, *Facing a Pandemic: The African*

Adebayo pointed out that I discussed these themes as if the African church is monolithic, missing my disclaimer: “I use the term church to refer in general to the Christian tradition in Africa: the historic churches, the so-called mainline churches and their denominations, as well as the African Initiated Churches (AICs).”⁹⁷ Adeboye added:

though a largely prescriptive work, *Facing a Pandemic* will long remain relevant in the debate on the response of African churches to the AIDS crisis because of the many pertinent issues it raises. The image of God represented by the human species is being battered and ravaged by HIV/AIDS. The church thus has an obligation to rise up to the challenge, reform its internal structures, and join hands with other stakeholders to battle the unrelenting pandemic on the African continent.⁹⁸

I must state that this is the most generous review any author can expect. However, the reviewer’s hesitation with a theological approach or the view that ethico-theological positions are dismissed as prescriptive reflects the position theologians find themselves in when they seek to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue. If I addressed many of the major issues involved in HIV/AIDS research, then theology and theologians can sit at the table and dialogue with others. While I may not have succeeded, as others would have liked, the fact that I wrote the book from an interdisciplinary perspective, with a theological proposition as my starting point does not mean that the tools of analysis had to be limited to theology, or the conclusions had to satisfy a specific theological perspective.

The other issue Adebayo raised is that fact that the work was largely prescriptive, a reference to the fact that I asked the Christian church in Africa to do several things as a way of combatting HIV and AIDS. Central to what I wanted the churches to do was for the religious communities to work out their own ethic as they deployed what the ARHAP researchers would describe as tangible and intangible assets. In order to illustrate this, I followed the work of the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Board. I was in and out of Cameroon for research as well as family business, had access to data and information, but I chose to focus on a qualitative, theological and philosophical analysis. This called for a different kind of conversations and dialogue with members of the

Churches and the Crisis of AIDS, *African Studies Review* 51, no. 3 (December 2008): 210.

97 Elias Kifon Bongmba, *Facing a Pandemic: The African Church and the Crisis of AIDS* (Waco, Tx.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 1.

98 Adebayo, review of *Facing*, 210.

community and faith groups. I also carried out individual discussions and conversations with people at all levels in Cameroon on HIV/AIDS, in preparation for writing the analysis. This approach did not preclude me from considering large social, political, legal, and economic issues that have become part of the HIV/AIDS discourse.

Theological and philosophical analysis can be neutral or bring what is called in theology a prophetic perspective. Here the question remains, is it possible to make claims about obligations, responsibilities, duties, and the “ought to” when dealing with pandemics like HIV/AIDS? Given that health issues raise personal and social issues, dealing with individual and communal responsibilities invites a certain critical perspective which must restate what the ethical stances of the communities under study is and therefore a critical observation about how well that community has lived up to its own creed and responsibilities. In the current health care climate these questions also call for an examination of the community’s responsibility on guarding and protecting the availability and access to medicines, the patient’s right to accept or reject a particular treatment. However, when and where families and entire communities take a stand against vaccination like the case of polio vaccination in Nigeria which was seen as a plot from the West, can the condemnation of the risk such a stand poses to children and the community be seen only in prescriptive terms? Cochrane argued that interdisciplinary approaches call for careful diplomacy and negotiation with the various stakeholders. The leaders of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) contacted the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to seek their support so that Muslim groups would give permission for their members to participate in the polio vaccine.⁹⁹ My point here is that this was a situation, in which one could have said the state of Nigeria has the right to impose and mandate that everyone takes the vaccines, but careful diplomacy made the case in a simple manner. In conclusion, the literature on HIV/AIDS in Africa demonstrates that theology and other disciplines are still worlds apart and scholars of different disciplines could strengthen their research by adopting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches to their research and enrich the public discourse on health and a richer understanding of African issues.

99 James R. Cochrane, Barbara Schmid, and Teresa Cutts, “The Hope of Alignment,” in *When Religion and Health Align: Mobilising Religious Health Assets for Transformation* (eds. James R. Cochrane, Barbara Schmid, and Teresa Cutts; Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2011), 7.

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