

ROOTED IN AFRICAN SOIL

Diaspora Scholars Explore Religion and Poverty

by Barbara A. Chaapel

Africa began to mentor Peter Paris in 1958, when he went to Nigeria after his seminary graduation from Acadia University in Canada as part of the Crossroads Africa Program, an intercultural exchange between students in the U.S. and Africa. That led to three years spent as the national traveling secretary for the Student Christian Movement of Nigeria in the early 1960s.

"All through my career I have been looking for ways to reconnect with Africa, and my roots there," says the quiet man who has been PTS's Elmer G. Homrighausen Professor of Christian Social Ethics since 1985. He came to Princeton in part because the Seminary offered him the resources to visit Africa to do research every two years. Those visits contributed to the 1995 publication of his book *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse*. And in 1997 he lived and taught in Ghana, half the year on paid sabbatical, the other half on his own.

The continent is, as it were, under his skin.

"I have always been interested in how the African religious and moral experience, particularly in regard to slavery and colonialism, relates to African Americans in the diaspora," he says. "And there is a syncretism between African indigenous worldviews and the biblical worldview." Paris believes that because of this, Africans have "taken to" Christianity. "The center of Christianity numerically in the 21st century is Africa," he points out. "In Europe the churches are becoming museums. In Africa, they are filled to capacity."

These interests have culminated in a scholar's dream: a Pan-African Seminar of Religious Scholars on Religion and Poverty, a four-year project funded by a \$400,000 Ford Foundation grant. Paris is the project director; Princeton Seminary administers the grant.

"The project undertakes an inquiry into the relationship of spirituality and materiality, that is, religion and poverty, among African peoples both on the African continent and throughout the African diaspora in North, South, and Central America," Paris explains. It's a subject as big as three continents.

What excites Paris most is that the project brings together African and African American religion scholars who would otherwise not know each other to write, to think, to visit sites in Africa and America to experience both poverty and religion, to learn from each other in their cultural and religious contexts, and finally to publish their experiences in a book of essays. In sum, to create a community of mentors. "It's like a traveling seminar," Paris explains, "where we immerse ourselves in each other's contexts and let those contexts teach us, so that we can teach others."

Since the project began in 2000, the scholars have already met in Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa, and they will meet in Jamaica this July and in the United States in July 2004. In each nation, the participants share their essays in progress, listen to analysis of that particular context by experts from the region, take field trips to observe religious responses to poverty, and share in social gatherings and cultural events. Between the yearly seminar meetings, they work on individual writing projects, all centered on issues of religion and poverty and how gender, class, and ethnic/cultural diversity affect their analysis.

"This project begins a serious conversation by religious scholars about poverty and religion among African peoples," Paris says. "From the beginning, the interest of the Western world in Africa has focused on the latter's economic resources; all value in Africa was rapidly reduced to the value of its material resources, including its peoples. Enormous amounts of energy were expended to transfer Africa's natural and human resources to the West, where they were enslaved and used to produce wealth."

Paris believes that the subject of religion and poverty is expansive in its implications. It is integrally related to the African understanding of material resources, gender relations in marriage and family life, rights of inheritance, land ownership, the nature of work, social status, power, political leadership, health, and children.

"The economic situation in Africa bears striking similarities to that of African peoples in the diaspora," he says. "The conditions of the poor in America have grown steadily worse, and a disproportionate percentage of African America is categorized as a permanent underclass. This is similar to the poverty of many Africans and Caribbean peoples. We are looking at the way poverty has determined the form of religion. This involves studying liberation theology, inculturation, womanist and African women theologians, as well as the rapid growth of Pentecostalism and independent African churches."

The project scholars, who include PTS Ph.D. graduates Kossi Ayedze (Togo), David Mosoma (South Africa), Takatso Mofokeng (South Africa), and Nyambura Njoroge (Kenya), may be learning the most through their field experiences.

"We've visited areas in South Africa where 100,000 people live crowded together in corrugated tin shacks smaller than my office at the Seminary," says Paris with frankness. "There is no hygiene; the smells repulsed me. I don't think I could spend one night in such a place. In winter, people light kerosene lamps to stay warm and sometimes die in their sleep of suffocation because the oxygen is used up. We saw poverty beyond words."

Participants also took in a mission to street children sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church in Ghana. "There are children who bring themselves up alone on the street," says Paris. "The mission can't take them in, but it can provide resources to help them live better lives on the street, like teaching them crafts so they can make and sell things, and giving them health education so they can protect themselves from sexually transmitted disease. The church has a contextual ministry in that place."

In South Africa, the group visited a church-sponsored home for orphans infected with AIDS/HIV. It housed 50 children under 10, all of whom had come there as babies. One nine-year-old boy had been found as an infant with a note from his mother pinned to his clothes saying she had nothing to give the child and hoping that someone would care for him.

"It seemed at first like a graveyard for children," Paris says, "but the leaders were so kind, so completely dedicated to their mission. The children we saw were bright-eyed. The workers wanted them to flourish, to smile, to play, to learn, and to be loved for as long as possible in their short lives."

In Kenya, they visited a school run by Seventh Day Adventists who saved young girls from early (as early as six years old) family-fixed marriages. These girls, who will spend their childhood in the school, sang songs of welcome to the Ford scholars.

"In every African country the hospitality toward us has been enormous," Paris says. "To them, we are people of all colors ourselves, and we spark their imagination. They want to know about us and why we are together."

The Ford scholars are learning and doing theology not in the classroom, but in the context of life, where mentors are children and teachers and pastors and ethnic and cultural history. Paris thinks the contextual experiences are having a profound impact on the participants.

"The Americans in the group have more money than the Africans in the group," he says, "and they have to struggle with that, and how they spend their money. The one Muslim scholar in the group raises important questions for the Christian majority. All of the African scholars know someone personally who has died of AIDS in Africa; their families have known many losses. The Caribbeans have discovered that villages in Ghana have the same names as villages in Brazil and Jamaica, and that the cultural connections are strong. And when we visited the slave castles on the Gold Coast [buildings whose dungeons warehoused slaves waiting for transport while military governors worshipped in a chapel on the floor above], some of the African American and African Caribbean participants broke down and wept, knowing that they each had at least one ancestor who survived that bitter experience."

Paris expects the narratives of the slave trade, European colonialism, apartheid, and civil rights to flow through the essays that the participants are writing for the two-volume book that will conclude their four years together in 2004. The book will be published in the U.S. and in each region represented in the project—East Africa, West Africa, South Africa, and the Caribbean. (Paris is quick to add that the book will be appropriately priced in Africa, "where no one can buy a book that costs \$20 in the U.S.; they can only afford to pay \$3 or \$4 in countries where people may only earn \$1 a day.")

Each essay will be written from the writer's own context and from that of the wider African world. "Our dream is a cross-cultural collaboration among people with common ancestral roots who have been separated from one another for hundreds of years," Paris says.

He hopes the project will have another outcome—an international center for the study of African religion and society. "I imagine a coalition of universities, seminaries, and foundations in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa that could collaborate in and contribute to conversation and scholarship about African and African American and Caribbean religion. We are really one family in spite of our diversity."

Such a center would assure the project outliving its architect. "I chose young scholars for the project," Paris says, "so it would have a life beyond me."

Like any true mentor, his roots have given others wings. ■



Dr. Paris (front row, second from right) and participants in the Pan-African Seminar on Religion and Poverty

PAN-AFRICAN SEMINAR SCHOLARS

from Ghana:
Rabiatu Ammah
Elizabeth Amoah
J.O.Y. Mante

from Kenya:
Esher Mombo
Nyambura Njoroge

from Togo:
Kossi Ayedze

from South Africa:
Madipoane
Masenya
Takatso Mofokeng
David Mosoma

from Brazil:
Luiza Benicio

from Tanzania:
Laurenti Magesa

from the Caribbean:
Barbara Bailey
Lewin Williams

from the United States:
Katie Cannon
Noel Erskine
Dwight Hopkins
Simeon Ilesanmi
Anthony Pinn



PTS graduates in the Pan-African Seminar (left to right): Kossi Ayedze, Dr. Peter Paris, Nyambura Njoroge, Takatso Mofokeng, David Mosoma, and Ray Owens, PTS Ph.D. student and Paris's assistant