

The History of this Special Issue: A Journey of Solidarity

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An Invitation

In late 2012, at the Desmond Tutu Center in New York City during a summit on global religions and human sexuality, I was in conversation with Dr. Kapyia Kaoma about the wave of anti-homosexuality laws and the rising violence against sexual minorities in Africa. Kaoma said, ‘We need to change the narrative in Africa about sexual minorities, particularly the theological narrative. And, we need to gather African scholars and faith leaders together on the continent. Would you work with me on this?’

This conversation held the invitation to a journey for me. I clearly understand the why—the reasons calling me to accompany Kaoma on this journey. As a person of faith and a Christian, I am called to love God and neighbour as the central commandments in the Christian faith. Moreover, everyone is my neighbour—including the sexual minorities in harm’s way because of the legacy of colonial laws and the exportation of homophobia from the United States. Once I learned about this global export of homophobia from my own country which was doing harm in Africa and around the world, I knew that I could not be silent. I could not be a bystander to this injustice, particularly when this homophobia is being embraced by influential religious and political leaders and persecution against sexual minorities is being sanctioned in the name of God.

The question remained how. How could I, a white man from the United States, accompany Kaoma on this journey, particularly the journey to be with African scholars and faith leaders? It can be easy to travel, to visit another culture in a cavalier way when ethics are not considerations. It is quite another matter when one is concerned about impact in a cultural space not of one’s own background, particularly in light of colonial history.

The navigation of this ethical tension between the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ in this context is informed by solidarity in the action of accompaniment which resulted in this Special Issue. It was clear to me now that I was being invited to accompany Kaoma on this journey with an extraordinary purpose. As an Anglican priest from Zambia, Kaoma understands firsthand the theological and cultural landscapes

across Africa. So, Kaoma took the lead on engagement with the African scholars and my responsibility was to accompany him by taking care of the administration, logistics and hospitality for the consultation.

The Journey to KwaZulu-Natal

Kaoma has long been associated with the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and its *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. We are deeply grateful that Dr. Gerald West, Senior Professor of the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, University of KwaZulu-Natal and General Editor of the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, and his colleague, Janet Trisk, the Editor for the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, offered us the opportunity to produce this Special Issue.

Kaoma and I served as the organisers of the consultation and as co-editors of this Special Issue. While we know the cultural context includes both Christianity and Islam, we decided that this first consultation would centre upon the Christian tradition. This consultation brought African scholars, faith leaders and students together from across the continent to discuss the creation of this new narrative and to produce this Special Issue. This consultation was conceived as a convening with two purposes: to produce this Special Issue of African voices on human sexuality and religion, and the creation of a network of African scholars and faith leaders. This consultation was a joint project of the Global Faith and Justice Project of the Horizons Foundation, San Francisco, California, USA and Political Research Associates, Somerville, Massachusetts, USA.

When Dr. Isabel Phiri, the Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland learned about our consultation on religion and human sexuality in Africa, she expressed interest in having the WCC participate. Founded in 1948, the World Council of Churches ‘brings together churches, denominations and church fellowships in more than 110 countries and territories throughout the world, representing over 500 million Christians and including most of the world’s Orthodox churches, scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed churches, as well as many United and Independent churches. At the end of 2013, there were 345 member churches. While the bulk of the WCC’s founding churches were European and North America, today most member churches are in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East and the Pacific.’

The World Council of Churches was in the process of establishing its Reference Group on Human Sexuality, which was approved by its Tenth General Assembly

in Busan, South Korea. Their plans to have a consultation of African scholars and faith leaders harmonised with the consultation Kaoma and I were organising. Prof. Isabel Phiri and her WCC colleagues selected fifteen African scholars to join the fifteen African scholars selected by Kaoma. Dr. Gerald West invited five graduate students from the University of KwaZulu-Natal to participate in the consultation. Geronimo Dusamala, Advocacy Officer, WCC United Nations Office, New York worked with Kaoma and Adee on the programme for the consultation.

Our African Scholars Consultation on Human Sexuality and Religion met from 28 to 31 August 2014 at the Thorn Tree Lodge, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Thirty African leaders from ten African countries gathered for this historic consultation: Botswana, Cameroon, Lesotho, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The consultation was inspired by the commitment to change the African narrative and reality from persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons and their families to acceptance. Moreover, we committed to making change happen in faith communities, theological schools, universities and in civil society across Africa.

We began each day with morning prayer. The consultation was structured into sessions by topics. Each plenary session had a moderator, a panel sharing abstracts, a commentary by a scholar, which was followed by a discussion among the entire group. The topics included: religion and human sexuality; the impact of religion upon the criminalisation of sexual minorities; gender, sexual and human rights; HIV/AIDS; the Church and human sexuality; the Bible and the ethics of human sexuality; politics; and theological education. On the second day of the consultation, we visited The Capture Site where Nelson Mandela was arrested and reflected upon his journey and autobiography *A Long Walk to Freedom*.

The KwaZulu-Natal Declaration

At the outset, Kaoma asked the group if they wanted to have a declaration from our consultation and the response was yes. Three of the scholars, Dr. S.N. Nyeck, Judith Kotze and Dr. Kapyka Kaoma met throughout the consultation to draft the declaration and they presented it to the entire group for review and approval. The result was the KwaZulu-Natal Declaration which was unanimously approved on 31 August 2014. This declaration provided inspiration for this Special Issue.

The Call for Writers

At the closing of the consultation, Kaoma offered a passionate call for papers to be submitted for this Special Issue. The call was to African scholars interested in

religion and human sexuality. While most of the writers included here attended the consultation, additional scholars submitted papers, too. All of the writers were encouraged to familiarise themselves with the KwaZulu-Natal Declaration as a guide for their unique exploration and treatment of the topic of religion and human sexuality from an African perspective.

African Voices

The complexity of the topic of religion and sexual diversity in Africa is illustrated by the variety of writing styles and backgrounds of the writers. The backgrounds of these writers include Biblical scholar, poet, theologian, political scientist, pastor, traditional healer, legal scholar, ethicist, and human sexuality researcher. The writers examined non-binary spaces in distinctly African contexts infused by religion; same-sex relationships; women's sexuality; and misrepresentation of African sexual diversity by Western colonial interpreters.

Synergies emerged among the writers with the invitation to listen to the often-silenced African voices and the application of the value of *ubuntu*. While some might suggest that there is one African voice on religion and human sexuality, this collection of writers demonstrate the existence of a veritable symphony of African voices. The variety among these writers in their humanity, life experiences and writing styles illustrates that Africa is clearly not limited to one form of sexuality or sexual expression; but rather, these African voices make the case for a vibrant sexual diversity across Africa.