



Reading New Signs of the Times in our Globalized World: the Challenge from Africa

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Several years ago when I was a young Jesuit—indeed, several years ago!—when I was beginning to work at the newly-founded Center of Concern, our team had a fascination with the concept of “reading the signs of the times.” It was an approach to discerning God’s actions in history, of being sensitive to the deeper and wider meanings of everyday events both large and small. It was very Ignatian, a way of “finding God in all things” that gave faith relevance to the political, economic and social analysis that underpinned our educational and advocacy work at the Center of Concern.

This reading the signs of the times has continued to be central to my work the past 20 years in Africa, specifically at our Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection (JCTR) in Lusaka, Zambia. It is especially important in a country like Zambia that is marked by the “prosperity-poverty paradox” that also marks so much of the rest of the beautiful and wonderful continent of Africa. What is this “prosperity-poverty paradox” that I speak of?

Well, I come from Zambia. Many of you will know Zambia—you won’t mistake it for Gambia, or for Zimbabwe! And you may know that it is one of the richest countries in Africa in terms of resources: land, water, agriculture, minerals, tourist sites, and peace. Yes, peace—46 years of Independence with 73 tribes living together without ethnic conflict.

We are the envy of our neighbors! Southern African neighbors like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where over four million have died in the past decade in conflicts that are local but largely are international, fights over the DRC’s immensely rich minerals; or Zimbabwe, where a previously rich economy has suffered a melt-down because of the megalomaniac stance of its aged President; or South Africa, which will host the World Cup next June—where real “football” is played—soccer!

Yes, Zambia is such a rich country. But with some of the poorest people in the world! The United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), ranks us 166 out of 177 countries, according to measures such as life expectancy (just over 40 years for Zambians), literacy (especially low among women), and meeting basic needs (so unequally distributed in our rich country).

In the research, education and advocacy programs of our JCTR, we speak of Zambia as a country of great potentials and great problems. But we seriously believe that the potentials outweigh the problems! The potentials outweigh the problems. The task, then, is to get those potentials applied to those problems. And it is thus that we face this “prosperity-poverty paradox.”

In an effort to respond effectively to that paradox through the research we undertake on macro-economic issues such as debt and trade, and on micro-economic issues such as household cost of living, through the education we do in courses and workshops and publications, and through the advocacy we promote in political action programs, we are, I believe, guided by a reading of the signs of the times. This is our value approach, our commitment to be not simply another NGO or civil society organization, but an FBO, a faith-based organization, guided both implicitly and explicitly by the church’s social teaching (CST).

It is some dimensions of my reading of the signs of the times that I want to briefly share with you this evening. I am myself challenged by the title of the lecture that was suggested to me: “Reading New Signs of the Times in Our Globalized World: The Challenge from Africa.” Indeed, some of the signs I will refer to are new, all are part of the scene of globalization, and they do come from Africa to you here in the USA, residents of a nation now presided over by a son of Africa!

Consistent to my well-known style of writing and lecturing, I’m going to present my ideas this evening in three points. (I’ve been told I’m a very Trinitarian Jesuit!) These are three phenomena that do present challenges from Africa: (1) climate change, (2) development model, and (3) cultural crisis.

CLIMATE CHANGE

I don’t think that I need to dwell too much on explaining the phenomenon of “climate change.” (I note that we readily speak of that topic more than the topic of “global warming,” something that was difficult to focus attention on during the frozen meeting at Copenhagen last December or the recently-concluded chilly winter endured in these northern climes!) But climate change is, I believe, a sign of the times that calls for deep reflection.

First, it draws us into a more profound engagement with humanity’s common home, Earth. This engagement takes the form of scientific study of what actually is occurring as weather patterns dramatically shift around the globe. Such studies go on within the universities and institutes everywhere, hopefully with great seriousness especially here in the United States. And we are further drawn into theological discernment of the implications and responsibilities of our human patterns of interacting with nature. These are matters surely appropriate for reflection at a distinguished place such as is hosting us this evening, the Washington Theological Union.

But I want to suggest what reading of this sign of the times, global warming, comes from our African experience. This is the challenge of appreciating the consequences of global warming on the lives of our sisters and brothers throughout the continent of Africa, sisters and brothers whose life styles and work patterns are not the causes of global warming but who profoundly experience the consequences of global warming.

Let me draw your attention to a statement just released three weeks ago by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the African Union Commission during a special meeting held in Lilongwe, Malawi. It can help us appreciate what climate change means for Africa today and tomorrow. I quote:

Agricultural output is expected to decrease by 50 per cent in Africa, resulting in severe undernourishment as a result of unchecked climate changes. The health burden and conflicts will increase as populations fight over dwindling resources. The need for Africa to develop adaptation and mitigation strategies cannot be overemphasized. The costs of adaptation and mitigation are, however, extremely high and beyond the means of African countries. It is estimated that the cost of adaptation could be anywhere between 5 and 10 per cent of the continental GDP. It is therefore important for the international community to help in financing the cost of climate change adaptation and mitigation in Africa.

What is the message of this sign of the times, global climate change? It is more than a call for additional funds to assist in meeting the necessary costs of adaptation and mitigation. It is a call to recognize the simple but disturbing fact that the climate change being experienced in Africa at this moment – and I can tell you stories directly from Zambia – is not caused by the people of Africa. No, it is the lifestyles and industrial patterns of the people of North America, of Europe, and, increasingly of China. Unless peoples, governments and industries outside of Africa quickly and forcefully address that fact, for example, here in the USA, the people of Africa will suffer because of you. I'm sorry to say that so bluntly, but it is the truth, a physical truth, an economic truth and a moral truth that must be acknowledged and responded to if justice is to be done.

So what is God calling us to by this sign of the times, climate change—and its disastrous effects around the world, but especially in that part of the world I come from, Africa? Surely an examination of our life styles and industrial patterns and an exploration of subsequent substantial changes in these life styles and industrial patterns. A “green revolution” is not only the cry of ecological activists but of our God in history. And this is a strong challenge coming today from Africa.

DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Second, I believe a significant—and related—sign of the times is the fundamental questioning of the dominant orthodox development model of economic growth. I don't intend to go into a deep analysis of this model – I am presuming that my audience here this evening is familiar at least with the general outlines of an approach to development that measures success with indicators such as GDP and investment statistics, that focuses on human improvements as by-products (“trickles down”) of business expansions, that espouses the free market as the primary governor of the economy, and that looks more to short-term profitability than long-term sustainability.

Such a development model of economic growth has long been challenged by papal encyclicals and by non-orthodox economists (some who have won Nobel Prizes!), by radical campaigners and by ordinary citizens who have felt the consequences of such a non-human approach to economics. But the model has, of course, most strongly been tested in the current global economic crisis. You here in the USA can confirm that from your own experiences.

But is it not a sign of the times that such a model has caused untold human suffering in Africa? For there its most blatant manifestations, the structural adjustment programs and subsequent “Washington Consensus” approaches, have brought neither economic prosperity nor social enhancements.

Zambia is all-too-sad a proof of that. In the 1990s we experienced a decade of the most rigid, most rapid, most radical structural adjustment program in Africa. SAP – my Zambian friends told me

that this stood for Starve African People, Stop All Production, Send Away Profits, or, in the local language, *satana ali pano*—the devil is in our midst! As concern for people was left out of programs of liberalization, privatization, retrenchments, budget cuts, and the opening of borders, the quality of life plummeted.

Subsequent adjustments to this structural adjustment approach have meant a bit more flexibility in economic arrangements but still a reliance on a model of growth that all too often leaves people out of the equation. For example, Chinese investments have been attracted into Zambia—and more widely into Africa—which pay less than necessary attention to decent wages and working conditions, acceptable environmental standards, and promotion of local entrepreneurs. International trade negotiations go on frequently without adequate attention paid to human benefits and costs. And agriculture development rooted in and favorable to the small scale farmer is all too often overlooked.

But what does this questioning of the regnant approach of an economic growth model of development mean as a challenge coming from Africa? For you here in the USA and throughout the so-called “One-Third World” (note that I do not say the “First World” and certainly not the “developed world”!), I believe it means the need to take seriously the intellectual and activist movements for “sustainable growth,” “green growth” and even “no growth.”

Is it not a sign of God’s action in history, a significant sign of the times, that our home, our Earth, is crying out to us to re-examine whether we have identified the “good” with “goods” and become trapped in a consumerist mentality damaging not only to personal growth but also to social well-being and to ecological sanity and sustainability? Surely the rejection of the dominant development model is a challenge from Africa.

CULTURAL CRISIS

Third, certainly one of the important signs of the times is the cultural crisis experienced in so many different forms across the globe. Culture is of course a major contributor to identity and uniqueness, community and solidarity, empowerment and future-building. When culture is endangered at its richest roots, then all of society suffers. I believe that something Africa is going through at this moment is a sign of the times that deserves our attention, for it truly presents a challenge from Africa.

Let me phrase this crisis in an ecclesial context, though it obviously has a much wider context. Last year, I was privileged to be on the advisory team for the Bishops of East Africa at the Second African Synod. The significance of this Second African Synod, I believe, will be much greater than simply its emergence from and contribution to the most vital and viable Catholic Church in the world. (But that’s another talk!)

In his homily at the Synod’s opening Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica on October 4, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI used a particularly meaningful and strikingly beautiful phrase. He remarked that “Africa represents an enormous spiritual ‘lung’ for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope.” I take that to refer to the basic religious sensibility of the African people, the sacred sense of *ubuntu*, the cultural values of family, community, respect and hospitality—these are but a few of the elements that give vital breath to the continent today.

You may know what the word “ubuntu” means. In the Bantu languages, one of which I learned for my pastoral work in Zambia, ubuntu means humanness, humanity, to be human in its richest

sense. This is expressed in the beautiful African proverb, "I am because we are, and we are because I am." My talents, possibilities, future are so because I belong to a community; and this community's richness, creativity, future are so because it is made up of individuals like me. "Individualism" is out of the question in an authentic African context!

Of course, do not let me be overly romantic or unrealistic – there are plenty of departures from this high sacred stance of ubuntu! But the basic moral truth is that I am less complete as a human person if I live in a world where others have less of a chance of being fully human, in every sense of the word. Together, we are humans and apart we are not. Another proverb expressing ubuntu clearly states: "A person is a person through other persons."

Now this cultural value is part of that spiritual "lung" spoken of by Benedict. But the Pope went on in his synod homily to caution against what he termed "two dangerous pathologies" that could cause illness in this essential African "lung." The first was the "spiritual toxic waste" exported from the One-Third World, a "practical materialism, combined with relativist and nihilist thinking." The second was a "virus" of "religious fundamentalism, mixed together with political and economic interests," that promotes intolerance and violence. I would suggest that these "two dangerous pathologies" are certainly not threats only to the health of the African spiritual lung!

Surely, therefore, the identification of and response to these pathologies is part of the task today of reading the signs of the times. Listen again to the description provided by Benedict: the "spiritual toxic waste... of a practical materialism, combined with relativist and nihilist thinking" and a "virus... of religious fundamentalism, mixed together with political and economic interests," that promotes intolerance and violence.

I leave it to you here in the USA to identify what might be relevant. But I suggest it does not take too much discernment to see some of these toxic wastes coming from popular entertainment schemes and contemporary atheisms and some of the viruses being manifested in anti-gender biases and political "Tea Parties."

Surely a challenge coming from Africa is to be open enough to examine the cultural crisis endemic in the USA at this critical time in the process of globalization.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by acknowledging that there certainly are many more challenges coming from Africa today. But for the sake of time, I have chosen to focus on these three: (1) climate change, (2) development model, and (3) cultural crisis. For me these are not simply scientific or economic or cultural challenges. No, they are profound instances of God acting in history.

Remember the well-known passage in Chapter 16 of Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus confronts a challenge about his ministry.

The Pharisees and Sadducees came along, and as a test they asked Jesus to show them some sign in the sky. He gave them this reply: "In the evening you say, 'Red sky at night, the day will be bright.' But in the morning you say, 'Sky red and gloomy, the day will be stormy.' If you know how to read the look of the sky, can you not read the signs of the times?" [Matthew 16:1-3]

You know that this encounter occurred after the instances described in Chapters 14 and 15, where Jesus had fed the 5,000, walked on the water, cured the many sick and crippled and blind, and fed

the 4,000. You can almost sense the frustration of Jesus with the Pharisees and Sadducees—where have you been all this time, don't you see God acting in history, can't you read the signs of the times!

My wish is that Jesus will not be frustrated with you and me, that we really will be sensitive to the challenges coming from Africa, and that we will read the new signs of the times in our globalized world. That is our task, that is our hope, that is our prayer!