Mourning the Passing of a Pioneer of African Church History, Ogbu Kalu (1942-2009)


The untimely recent death of Ogbu Kalu (1942-2009), a giant among African church historians, occurred just after a year when he published two major books and co-edited a third, continuing the impressive publishing output he maintained over his sadly foreshortened life. As a friend and admirer of Kalu’s, I am honored to reflect here on this collection of essays, each of which was first prepared in the first years of the 21st century, and use the occasion to consider his broader significance for our appreciation of African Christianity.

A longtime professor at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka who long cut a considerable figure in global Christian theological circles, Kalu moved in 2003 to McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois, not far from the residence of Barack Obama. The lecture he gave upon assuming the inaugural Henry Winters Luce Professorship in World Christianity at McCormick which he held at his death opens this collection and generates its title, at the same time identifying an abiding theme of the ten other essays as well. Kalu unashamedly dons Clio’s mantle as an historian (she being the ancient Greek muse of history), and insists repeatedly that to capture something like African Christianity, its religious underpinnings must be neither ignored nor subjected to academic reduction to sociological or other factors. Instead the faith-inspired bases of Christian vitality in Africa must instead be appreciated, understood, and celebrated—so that for this subject at least, Clio *must* don sacred garb, if the treatment is to be anything other than cursory.

Readers familiar with Kalu’s work—especially his *Power, Poverty and Prayer: The Challenges of Poverty and Pluralism in*
African Christianity (2000), his edited volume African Christianity: An African Story (2005 and republished in 2007), and his more recent African Pentecostalism (2008), not to mention a number of articles appearing in collections and periodicals in recent years—will recognize here familiar themes and subjects. Indeed, some sections are repeated intact, or very nearly so, from previously released writings.

As he does elsewhere, Kalu takes seriously an historian’s concern for temporality, and at the heart of this collection offers four chapters (chapters 6-9) that address stages in the evolution of African Christianity over the past century or so, each organized around a specific period of time and contesting historiographic emphases of previous scholarly assessments. In chapter 6, late 19th- and early 20th-century Ethiopianism, early on pigeonholed as an attempt by disloyal Christian Africans to seek power at missionary expense and later as proto-nationalism in religious guise, is reconsidered by Kalu as an early African response to the Spirit-led (or, as he says, “pneumatic”) potential of the Gospel, heretofore muted by expatriate missionary caution. In chapter 7, Kalu argues that the Christian prophetic movements emerging prior to World War II in various parts of Africa share in the same pneumatic instinct, and cannot be treated as resulting from outside agitators like the African-American missionaries sometimes blamed by colonizers and other missionaries for “stirring up the natives.” In chapter 8, Kalu shows that missionary attempts to retain control over their churches after World War II through what he dubs “passive revolution” rarely emphasized genuine African concerns, but were mainly pursuing self-preservation. Happily, they were for the most part undermined by African initiatives. Finally, in chapter 9 Kalu argues that the recent explosion of Pentecostal and charismatic vitality in African Christianity reflects African rather than foreign energizing.

These middle four essays, historical overviews with post-colonial, post-missionary, and Africa-centered coloring, are sandwiched by more eclectic pieces. The opening title essay puts humorous self-deprecation to good use by highlighting the
complexities of the present moment in historical scholarship. Kalu observes today both a renewed awareness of Christianity as a world religion and a scholarly discomfort with what used to be called “church history.” Putting these together, he discerns an urgent need to overcome analytical approaches incapable of appreciating the religiosity of many of the world’s newer Christians. As he writes, “[I]t is difficult to tell the story of the church by rejecting its essence” (16), and “For the largest number of Christians in the world, God intervenes directly in their everyday lives through the power of the Holy Spirit” (18). Consequently, “Only a story that takes theological realities into its arsenal of facts can plumb the realities of our time” (20). Chapter 2 examines the primal worldview of Africans and how it sometimes undercuts contemporary ecological concerns. Yet that worldview can also be critically drawn upon for a renewed ecology to overcome an “ambivalent eco-ethics” (43). This is followed by an historical examination of changing views of poverty in colonial West Africa, foregrounding the ways colonialism led to new forms of destitution for which traditional societies had no adequate responses.

Chapter 4 offers a study of an African-American missionary couple in late 19th-century Sierra Leone that serves to recover the long-submerged history of African-Americans in the evangelization of western Africa, while chapter 5 reviews the extensive discussion of African Christian education which took place at the groundbreaking 1910 Edinburgh Conference. This conference, which brought together an unprecedented number of Christian missionary groups, had no African Christians, an absence that Kalu adduces to partially explain the internally self-contradictory nature of the reports. After the middle four historical chapter, Kalu continues in chapter 10 with a discussion of James Cone’s influence on the 1985 Kairos Document emanating from South Africa, and shows how Cone himself was shaped by the Confessing Church’s 1933 Barmen Declaration authored by Karl Barth. The collection concludes with a programmatic overview of theological education in contemporary Africa, first delivered in 2007 in Accra. Here Kalu
acknowledges the academic, pastoral, financial, and structural challenges facing ministerial formation in many parts of the continent.

Throughout, Kalu insists that African Christians must tell their own stories about how “the rain of the Gospel” met them (15), and also that the shape of Christianity’s emergence in Africa depends on the pre-existing underlying cultural predispositions that shaped African appropriations of the Gospel. As he does regularly, he also draws upon an impressive array of other disciplines and writers as he makes his points, and fears not to attack views that he feels misread African Christianity as a foreign religion.

This volume also contains some of what I have felt are limitations in Kalu’s approach. First, his numerous references to other scholars tend to be undeveloped and rarely engage them in depth, so that his use of their ideas can seem self-serving—a particular problem when he disagrees with them, as he does with Paul Gifford, for instance. The many and rather contradictory references to extraversion, externality, and related terms (x, 100, 181, 211, and “extravenous,” 144) exemplify this problem, for Gifford’s use is often more subtle than Kalu’s depiction, and the term “extraversion” is used in a related but different way by political scientist Jean-François Bayart.

In a second and related issue, he often uses ideas without referring to their source in other scholars. Examples include his multiple references in this book to A. E. Hirschmann’s triplex of exit, loyalty, and voice, used by Kalu to consider differing African responses to Christianity; James Scott’s notion of legibility, which he uses to consider missionary goals in relationship to African Christians; E. P. Thompson’s notion of the moral economy, used to consider the shared expectations created in African Christians and missionaries about their mutual accountability to each other; Robin Horton’s notion of religion as engaged in explanation, prediction, and control; and to the term “the intimate enemy,” used variously, but in an important way by colonial theorist Ashis Nandy. I do not think that Kalu is consciously hiding his dependence—he elsewhere mentions these sources, and his lack of
acknowledgement reflects instead the familiar way he draws upon these concepts—but he sometimes deploys them in ways their originators (or the mediators by which he came to awareness of these terms and ideas) might dispute.

Third, at times in his effort to—very appropriately, in my opinion—emphasize the essential African nature of the Christianity that has appeared on the continent, he overgeneralizes about the “African worldview” within which this Christianity has appeared. He asserts at one point, “Despite the variety of names and forms, African traditional religions do genuinely exhibit an astonishing uniformity of emphasis, which make merely local variations on a few axiomatic themes to a much greater degree than we find in Christianity or Hinduism” (29). This may be the case—though I have my doubts, and arguing the case would be difficult indeed. What is certain is that Kalu’s depictions of such traditional religions and the worldview in which they exist clearly depend on a Nigerian, and often an Igbo template, one that others in Africa (for example, Nilotic-language-speaking pastoralists, forest-dwellers from Congo, or Kalahari desert residents like the Khoi-San) might not share.

One additional unfortunate shortcoming in this volume is the large number of misspellings and typographical errors that plague the text. To take only one example, the apartheid-era massacre in South Africa took place neither in Shaperville (286) nor Sharperville (288).

These criticisms, however, do nothing to take away from the intelligence and persuasiveness of these essays, and from the importance of Kalu’s larger career as teacher, scholar, and advocate. A 2005 collection that honored him for his work in training and inspiring a younger generation of African church historians underscored his legacy, and these essays display it again. No one in the past two decades has done more to capture the complexity and vitality of African Christianity than Ogbu Kalu, and his passing represents the loss of an irreplaceable contributor to church and scholarship.

Paul Kollman  University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA.

This book provocatively epitomizes a compelling theological framework for comprehending something of the nature and mission of the Church with attention to its global, postmodern, and ecumenical import in the twenty-first century.

Gaillardetz traces the provenance of the communitarian consciousness of the Church to ancient Israelite faith as shaped by the exodus event. In that event Israel was envisioned as a priestly people, a royal, and holy nation (Ex. 19: 5-6). By that event Israel became a people called to be a servant community by God, fulfilling God’s intention for the world. Similarly, the post-Easter encounter of the risen Lord constituted his disciples into a community that was empowered by the Holy Spirit for mission in the world. In this way, G. presents a paradigm that brings the Christological and Pneumatological foundations as well as the Institutional and Charismatic dimensions of the Church together. This vision also bears testimony to Pauline understanding of the Church as a koinonia of believers called by God by the power of the Spirit into common life in Christ and for ministry and service (diakonia) in the life of the community (1 Cor. 12: 27-31). One hopes that this more holistic approach to ecclesiology will set a standard for future research on this subject.

This awareness of early Christian communitarianism inspires G. to favor a catholicity that connotes an ecclesial unity that is always a unity-in-diversity and not a stifling uniformity as has been the perpetual temptation of the Church. G. is for a catholicity that presupposes a dialogical mission since all cultures are potentially receptive to the gospel, and all cultures have gifts to offer for the enrichment of the gospel; he thus envisions a communion ecclesiology that is all inclusive. G. demonstrates in this book a firm grasp of the foundational issues of communion ecclesiological discourse today; he displays competence, ability, and an openness
to engage diverse approaches of experts in the field including the magisterium of the Catholic Church as well as Orthodox theologians and others from diverse faith traditions.

For G., the Church as communion is fundamentally a People called by the Triune God and built up for mission through various forms of ministries. Thus, Vatican II’s recovery of the theology of baptism which guarantees the fundamental equality and common dignity of all the People of God, as well as charisms, did not only significantly undermine lay/clergy separation, but also repositioned the necessary role of the ministerial priesthood within the broader perspective of the priesthood of the baptized. This recovery, moreover, not only reoriented ministry from one of power to that of Christian service and pastoral care but also paved way for a re-emergence of lay ministries in the Church. G. here explores further what he wrote elsewhere that the dominant magisterial characterization of lay vocation as secular hardly offers an ontological definition of the Laics but merely a typological one.

G. competently mines communion ecclesiology with both ressourcement and aggiornamento in mind. G. reimagines different elements of the Church such as apostolicity, laity, episcopacy, papacy, mission, etc, with a profound ecumenical sensitivity. I must however, observe that in matters of Church structures, G. appears to be more sympathetic with the view that such structures are more culturally determined and consequently, should be subject to change when they no longer serve the purpose for which they were established ab initio. Though he mentions the Holy Spirit with respect to these structures, but he fails to substantiate or rather sustain the tension between the cultural contingency and the role of the movement of the Spirit in guiding the Church in the development of such structures. It will be great to consider filling the above lacuna in subsequent edition in order to strike a balance.

The aforementioned shortcoming notwithstanding, G. has written this book with an impressive scholarship that captures the contemporary global and postmodern situation of the Church and a consequent communion ecclesiology, all inclusive enough to meet the demands of diversity in the Church as well as the demands of
ecumenical and intercultural interreligious dialogue. It is a book that is a must read for all professors of ecclesiology, graduate students, undergraduates, and its modesty renders it appealing to all who love the Church.

Okechukwu C Njoku, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh.