

Network of Theology and Religious Studies

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Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary, Ethiopia
Lutheran Graduate School of Theology, Madagascar
School of Mission and Theology, Norway
Lutheran Theological Seminary, South Africa
Makumira University College, Tumaini University,
Tanzania
Dept. of Religious Studies, Makerere University, Uganda**

Research cooperation

One of the visions of our network (cf. *Network Newsletter* 1 (2001) 3-4) is to develop research projects that enable researchers from two or more of the partner institutions to work together. To achieve this we need two things: good projects and sufficient funding. Good projects are indeed necessary; “good” in the sense that they both keep a high academic standard and are relevant for the research political profile and institutional development of the participating institutions. Sufficient funding is obviously also necessary; the network as such has no money and all our projects depend on external funding.

The following pages will present a first example of this kind of research projects. The “Africanization of Biblical Studies” project includes four of our seven partner institutions. Its academic level (three doctoral projects) as well as its research political profile (Africanization) correspond with the visions for our

network, and it is externally funded by the Norwegian Council of Higher Education.

Knut Holter

The “Africanization of Biblical Studies” Project

Institutional context

In spite of a general interest for Old Testament studies in Africa, it is an unfortunate fact that African university departments of religion and/or theology, as well as African theological seminaries, generally speaking, face severe difficulties with regard to the development of an Old Testament scholarship that reflects African concerns, and also with regard to African staff recruitment to senior positions. These difficulties were pointed out as major problems at the network consultation in November 2000. The School of Mission and Theology, on the other hand, has developed a unique competence in this area, through its “Africa & Old Testament Program”; for a survey of ongoing and finished projects related to this program (journal, book series, several books, bibliographies, web resource pages, conferences, Ph.D./M.Phil.-projects), cf. http://www.misjons.hs.no/res/ot_africa/africa.html.

Objectives

The question of Africanization is a major challenge to African academic institutions of theology and religious studies, and not least to their presentation of biblical studies. Whereas the Bible used to be the book of the colonizers, it is today acknowledged as a book that expresses central aspects of African experience and identity, traditional as well as post-colonial, and there is a strong need to let this new understanding of the book be reflected in academic biblical studies. In response to this, the present project focuses on Africanization of biblical studies from two perspectives: staff development and scholarly approaches.

Main goal:

The project aims to contribute to an Africanization of biblical studies in three Eastern African research institutions: (i) Department of Religious Studies, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda; (ii) Makumira University College, Tumaini University, Usa River, Tanzania; (iii) Lutheran Graduate School of Theology, Fianarantsoa, Madagascar.

Sub-goals:

- Staff development: The project will train staff in the three institutions; the training will be organized as three D.Th. projects. In the global guild of biblical scholarship, African researchers experience various kinds of

marginalization. To some extent this marginalization reflects the general economic tension between North and South (lack of proper library services and other structures for scholarly interaction). However, to some extent it also reflects a lack of relevant competence. A solid training of researchers, as the project envisions, is probably the only means by which African biblical scholarship can be liberated from western dominance.

- Scholarly approaches: It is a primary aim of the project to develop D.Th. theses that relate biblical studies to the hermeneutical concerns of the African context of the researchers (the project's major perspective). Besides this, it is a secondary aim of the project to analyze critically the presuppositions and potentialities of the concept of an Africanization of biblical studies (the project's meta-perspective).

Organizing

The project is organized as a sandwich model:

- where the two partner institutions which developed the project and applied for its funding, Makerere University (Uganda) and School of Mission and Theology (Norway),
- together with two more partner institutions, Makumira University College of Tumaini University (Tanzania) and Lutheran Graduate School of Theology (Madagascar),
- go into an organized cooperation with an institution outside our network, the University of South Africa (South Africa), in order to make some use of its institutional infrastructure and supervision capacity.

On a practical level this means that the D.Th. students are enrolled as doctoral students at the University of South Africa: they have a main thesis promoter from this university (Professor Willie van Heerden, Dr Madipoane Masenya, Dr Magdel leRoux) and they make use of its institutional infrastructure. In addition, the project coordinator in Stavanger (Professor Knut Holter) serves as co-promoter for all three theses; his special responsibility is the African research context of the dissertation projects.

The D.Th. students stay in their home institutions, and they do their full time research there, in close contact (e-mail) with their thesis promoters. For annual periods of four months the D.Th. students come together for courses, supervision and bibliographical research in Stavanger (School of Mission and Theology) the first, second and fourth year, and in Pretoria (University of South Africa) the third year. In connection with these annual periods of four months there are:

- annual one-week colloquies, where D.Th. students, thesis promoters, and project coordinator discuss the individual D.Th. projects (the major perspective of the Africanization project)
- annual one-day workshops, where the presuppositions and potentialities of the concept of an Africanization of biblical studies are critically analyzed (the project's meta-perspective).

Dissemination

The project will be concluded by a publishing of an essay collection that includes essays presenting the individual Th.D. theses (the project's major perspective), and essays analyzing the concept of Africanization of biblical studies (the project's meta-perspective).

Dissertation projects

The project started up in August 2002, and the first semester was used to general reading and project development:

- Peter L. Kimilike (Makumira University College of Tumaini University, Tanzania): *An African Perspective on Poverty Proverbs in the Book of Proverbs*.
- Georges Razafindrakoto (Lutheran Graduate School of Theology, Madagascar): *The Use of Old Testament Texts in the Malagasy Religio-Cultural Context*.
- Philip Lokel (Department of Religious Studies, Makerere University, Uganda): *The Importance and Challenges of Finding Africa in the Old Testament: The Case of the Cush Texts*.

Each of these three dissertation projects will exemplify major perspectives on African Old Testament interpretation, and together they will improve our understanding of how the Old Testament is and can be interpreted in contemporary Africa.



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