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Joy Isabirye Mukisa & Christine Nakyeyune

Introduction

This chapter is about Grace Nyonyozi Ndyabahika's post-conflict pastoral theology and liberation ethics. It aims at examining her commitment to women emancipation based on her calling as a female priest. The ideas contained in this book chapter are influenced by the two feminist theologians' honest search for freedom to lead their own life liberated from the ecclesiastical roles imposed on women in the Church of Uganda.

Ndyabahika was born in Kyanamira village in the present day Kabale district. Ndyabahika's childhood life and education (Isabirye interview, 2023) influenced her decision to train for church ministry at Bishop Tucker Theological College. In 1969, Ndyabahika formally entered the theological space dominated by men at Bishop Tucker Theological College for a Certificate in Biblical Studies & Pastoral Theology. Men and women in the Church of the Province of Uganda (hereafter Church of Uganda) are usually understood as called by God to perform sacramental roles. This calling during Ndyabahika's time was never extended to women; instead they were only commissioned to religious life. While at Bishop Tucker Theological College, whenever an opportunity arose to talk about the role of women in the church, Ndyabahika would question a quasi-clerical status women were relegated to. She would always remind her male college mates who were not in the minority that women make up the majority of members of the Church of Uganda.

Ndyabahika graduated in 1971 and in the same year, August 14th she got married to the Reverend James Francis Ndyabahika with whom she had three children. Ndyabahika is one of the first 3 Ugandan women to be ordained priest in the Anglican Church of Uganda. However, she was

not ordained a priest in the Church of Uganda until 1983.¹ Her ordination into priesthood was characterized by official opposition from the Church of Uganda. In the absence of female role models, Ndyabahika was forced to forge out her own path to becoming a theological thinker. In 1973 Grace embarked on a Bachelor of Arts degree focusing on Biblical Studies & Social Ethics, at Trinity College, Deerfield, Illinois, USA. Her interest was to see how liberation theology, like other historical Christian movements, is based on the Old and New Testament teachings that are mostly concerning with the coming of the Kingdom of God. During her biblical studies, she came to learn that the Bible can be understood only when seen from the perspective of the oppressed. It was from Trinity College that Ndyabahika began to clearly appreciate a liberal theological stance that tends more to accommodate current intellectual movements.

In 1991 Ndyabahika was enrolled for a Master of Arts degree focusing on pastoral theology & liberation ethics at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, USA. At the Episcopal Divinity School, Ndyabahika came into contact with Katie Geneva Cannon who was Associate Professor of Christian Ethics. Cannon was not only widely regarded as a founder of the Womanist movement but also a well-known liberation theologian and Christian ethicist. Cannon became an influential figure in Ndyabahika's life. She taught her the importance of critical thinking in regard to the injustices endured by women. It was at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, MA that Ndyabahika began to search for freedom according to her own understanding, and to fight for the liberation of other people, especially women. Asked why she chose to go for Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, Ndyabahika said she wanted to study in a school that was well known for its progressive teaching. Episcopal Divinity School was well known throughout North America and the entire Anglican Communion for its progressive theological teaching on issues of social justice.

Today, as an ordained priest Ndyabahika is considered to be one of the well-known women liberation theologians in the East African region. She has excelled in pastoral theology, liberation ethics, leadership and conflict

¹ She was ordained in December 1983 together with Deborah Micungwa Rukara and Margaret Kizanye Byekwaso.

resolution, biblical studies, and social ethics. However, her areas of specialization are pastoral theology, liberation ethics, and counselling. She tackles the role of women in church and society, women discrimination from mainline church leadership positions and the fundamental role played by women in the peace and conflict resolution process. She examines human sexuality from the perspective of African Christian moral ethics. Ndyabahika identifies herself as a feminist liberation theologian and boldly shares the pain of women's exclusion from both theology and positions of power in the church, as well as the legitimization of the subordination of women in society. Ndyabahika's arguments focus on the premise that women should not be discriminated against in the theological, social, and civic responsibilities basing on gender; rather their potential should be harnessed for a better society. Ndyabahika's journey is as well a journey of those Christian women who seek equality in public and private spheres. She is passionate on the discourse about the woman's condition specifically the African woman. An Africa a woman has always been imagined within the context of the family. For instance, she is expected to accept marriage and have children because marriage is assumed to be her end goal in life. During her studies in the United States, Ndyabahika came to learn about African women who were freedom fighters during pre-colonial and independence movements. She believes that African feminist theology ought to primarily promote equal participation of both man and woman in church and society as God's children. Ndyabahika's theological interests in African feminist theology therefore can only be appreciated in the light of African male theology. Ndyabahika's ecclesiastical status became the door to freedom by breaking away from her African cultural expectations that place women solely in the domestic sphere.

Sources for her theological ideas

Ndyabahika rightly observes that much of Africa has misconceived feminist theology as entirely militant, which should not be. There are various categories of feminist theology some radical but there are others, like much of African feminist theologies that pay attention to the needs of Africans regardless of genderkj. The first source of Ndyabahika's

theological ideas is the Bible. However, her argument is that while women need to recognize the Bible as their final and permanent authority, theological engagement itself is based on the need for reformation. She argued that the church's teaching on the status of women has historically owed more to the social nature of the church than to biblical revelation. Within the Christian church, especially in Africa, Ndyabahika argues, there have been several women and men who have discovered the seeds of equality within the Bible and yet they have not perceived the equal status of man and woman as an idea intrinsic to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ndyabahika's second source of her theological ideas is feminist liberation theology from Latin America. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, women theologians from Latin America began to experience the patriarchal oppression that existed within the church. The patriarchal oppression within the church forced women liberation theologians to develop their own theological transformation. Feminist liberation theology gained momentum as female theologians from Latin American thought out a unique way of doing theology as a form of resistance against the oppressive systems both in church and state. Their theology focused on the daily realities of the poor and the oppressed in society. Ndyabahika is disheartened at the fact that all of feminist theology is thrown out of the window in Uganda with no minimal effort to understand what it is about.

Another source is women's experiences. Despite the challenges and constraints women face in society, Ndyabahika strongly states that relying on the saving power of God will sustain them and they will live fulfilled lives. She believes it is the same favor that has carried her throughout her ministry and in times of trouble. It was that favor, she states, that touched the whole Church of Uganda's Provincial Assembly in Uganda to lift the ban on ordination of women. The resistance to ordination of women was majorly based on religious and cultural grounds (Anglican Consultative Council, 1971:39; Byaruhanga, 2017:2).

Some specific features and uniqueness of her theology

Ndyabahika has grappled with theological issues, pastoral theology, liberation ethics, and conflict resolution. This section will pay attention to her theological reflections which are connected to the Ugandan civil and

liberation war period. The 1970 to 1986 were years of civil and liberation war that was chaotic, dominated by violence, civil conflict, and catastrophic economic and undemocratic governance. The civil and liberation wars in Uganda radically impacted on Ndyabahika's role as an educator within the Church of the Province of Uganda. During the period of the civil and liberation war, Ndyabahika was employed as a Social Worker/ Evangelist by the African Evangelical Enterprise, Nairobi, Kenya (1982-1984) and later transferred to Uganda and worked in the same position to 1986. During her time at the African Evangelical Enterprise African Evangelical Enterprise, belief in a God of justice that sided with the poor formed part of her discourse. She believed that bringing this message to the population was one of the Church's greatest contributions to the refugees and war-displaced people in Uganda. For Ndyabahika, it was very important to learn how to do theology through both listening to and observing people's lived and yet neglected experiences. For instance, Ndyabahika was disappointed with the Church's resistance to transformation, and she was also increasingly uncomfortable with the feminist movement from the United Kingdom and North America because it was not clear about the issues raised by feminist liberation theologians. Ndyabahika charged liberation theologians in the Church of Uganda of being blind to the patriarchal power relations existing among the church workers.

The patriarchal views of most male liberation theologians influenced Ndyabahika's theological perspectives in the opposite way from what many have expected. Ndyabahika quickly noticed the scars that war left on many women in Uganda. This economic and political turmoil caused pain for everyone and more especially women who, compared to men, suffered multiple layers of suffering. Ndyabahika understood the centrality of her priestly calling as a redemptive change agent and used her privileged position of an ordained priest in the Church of Uganda to help the disadvantaged. Seeing herself as a redemptive change agent, Ndyabahika developed healing solutions that came from intimate acquaintance with people and their problems. Right after the civil war, Ndyabahika helped address the struggles of refugees in Kenya on her return from the USA. She joined effort with several key women in politics like the current first lady in Uganda, Janet Museveni, and formed UWESO, and a prayer

ministry, and later with Miria Matembe, and Sarah Kingi and together they would lead prayer meetings in parliament and individual high-profile offices. In her interactions with women politicians, Ndyabahika insisted that those who served in government should live among the people they serve, rather than sending instructions and guidance from the safety, comfort, and security of the city center, Kampala. She would cite the example of Jesus Christ living among those he came to redeem. She encouraged them to emulate Jesus carrying out the following tasks:

- I. By identifying problems faced by the ordinary women in Uganda with the aim of finding the proper solution.
- II. By identifying deeply with people and finding practical solutions that are practicable.

From 1997 to 2002 Ndyabahika was a lecturer in the Department of Women and Gender Studies, at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. Working as an educator became a form of experiencing freedom for Ndyabahika. Through her teaching, Ndyabahika also learned from the experiences of particularly the female students she educated. Being a university educator was a methodologically central dynamic that would critically inform her later work. At Makerere University, Ndyabahika was more interested in listening to her students' real-life stories of sacrifice than engaging in academic philosophical arguments. Through her students' real stories, Ndyabahika began to notice how women's suffering in Uganda went unnoticed by her fellow academic staff members at Makerere University.

In July of 2002, Ndyabahika was engaged in a peace and conflict resolution conference to address the suffering of women during war and argued alongside others that these women's "involvement in the peace processes is not a luxury, *sic* [but] an absolute necessity (Adrian-Paul et al, 2002). Peace making requires dialogue between all parties involved. In speaking about dialogue, Paulo Freire makes a vital point that "...dialogue is an encounter among men and women who name the world, *sic* [therefore] it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others (Freire, 2000:89). "Consequently, no one can say a true word alone-nor can she *sic* [or he] say if *for* another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words" (Freire, 2000:88). In this instance, denying women who are victims of war to participate in this peace making process consciously

or not-by fundamentally believing a woman essentially has no agency, is dehumanization. Freire emphasizes that dialogue ought to consist of (1) profound love for people and for the world; (2) humility; (3) intense faith in humankind, leading to mutual trust; (4) hope; (5) critical thinking (Freire, 2000:89-92).

In her contribution to a book called, *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God*, edited by Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge, particularly in part one of the same book, *Women's Participation and Inclusiveness: Searching the Scriptures*, in her title *Women's Place in Creation*, Ndyabahika explores the place of a woman in creation. She rightly argues that the woman is not to be subjugated but to be considered an equal partner in doing life. Even in her divine assigned role as helper, she (the woman) is not to be a "subordinate or servant, but as a colleague, counterpart or sustainer" (Ndyabahika, 1996:24). The above contexts have shaped the kind of theology that Ndyabahika espouses. As a parish priest and counselor, Ndyabahika has worked tirelessly and continuously to better people's lives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ndyabahika has carried out her work as a spiritual counsellor, preacher, teacher, instructor, and theologian. Her vocational life defies the traditional theological anthropology advocated by the Church of Uganda, which holds that only men are suited to represent God's work in society. Ndyabahika's theological method led her to:

- I. Critically engage with her civil and liberation war context.
- II. Re-read the Bible through a feminist liberation lens and
- III. Deconstruct knowledge from a woman feminist theological perspective.

Ndyabahika's feminist theology is not only grounded in the daily needs of the oppressed groups and individuals but also has the potential to transform women's theological thinking, depending on the specificity of their social and cultural contexts.

End Notes

Freire speaks against the banking system of education where the teacher is the only one with knowledge and the student is only a receptacle. Such education, banking, regards students simply as objects in which knowledge is simply dumped into. Freire states that: “Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (Freire, 2000:72).

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