



Traditions & Beliefs

A Quarterly Publication of the Initiative for the Study of Religion and Spirituality in the History of Africa and the Diaspora (RASHAD)

Volume 4, Issue 3

St. Adalbert Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic Church

Materials in the Michael Schwartz Library's Special Collections Help RASHAD Document the History of a Local African American Faith Community

By Regennia N. Williams

Cleveland's St. Adalbert-Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic Church has long been recognized as a sacred landmark and a center of community life. Because it is one of many churches scheduled to close as part of a plan to save resources in the Diocese of Cleveland, it is also at the center of a very emotional public debate. *The Plain Dealer's* Michael O'Malley reported on the congregation's recent struggles in a July 18, 2009 article, "St. Adalbert Church, home to Cleveland's first black Catholic congregation, faces loss of its building amid diocesan downsizing." Church members voted 63-13 to challenge Bishop Richard Lennon's order to close the church by appealing to the Vatican, in the hope that congregants would be able to continue to worship in the building that they have called home since 1961.¹

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Fr. Langhals

Priest Conducts Unusual Mission

By FRANK STEWART, Church Editor

Nearly 2000 years ago the Nazarene started the mission movement when he said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel."

In the succeeding centuries the story of missions has been a fascinating chapter of church history involving the mystery of oriental countries.

For that reason many people think of missionary endeavor in connection with China, India, Korea and Egypt.

They forget that in crowded areas of great cities amid a heterogeneous population the modern church is carrying out that old injunction, "go and preach."

In Cleveland there are many such evangelistic labors which do not receive notice and acclaim of beautiful big churches in prosperous residential sections.

ONE of the noteworthy and outstanding missions in the city is the church of Our Lady of Blessed Sacrament—the only colored Catholic congregation in Cleveland.

You'd hardly ever notice the building—tucked in among the frame dwellings on E. 79th street, just a short distance south of Central avenue.

But here in this church under leadership of the Rev. Fr. Melchior Lochtefeld, C. P. S., and his assistant, the Rev. Fr. Henry Langhals, C. P. S., is being carried forward a remarkable religious undertaking.

There are more than 800 colored persons members of Our Lady of Blessed Sacrament parish which not only exerts a strong spiritual force in the community but operates a parochial school attended by 200 colored children.

The church is sponsored and directed by the Fathers of the Most Precious Blood, an association of religious priests whose principal aim is to give missions and retreats.

Incidentally, this society was introduced in America from Italy in 1844 at the request of Bishop Purcell of Cincinnati by the Rev. Fr. Francis De Sales Brunner. It has many Ohio activities.

The Fathers of the Most Precious Blood carry out the mission command of Christ because they teach and preach but expect and receive nothing in the way of worldly return.

THIS is the spirit reflected in the church on E. 79th street where Fr. Lochtefeld labors with the colored folk of that neighborhood.

I visited the parochial school where colored children of primary age start and continue in classes until they are ready to enter high school.

Center, Mother Alphonsa . . . teaches 8th grade class Frank and Fred Jones, twins, and Betty Johnstone

Discipline is almost perfect in the classrooms which are presided over by sisters in the Order of the Blessed Sacrament. School work is conducted on the standard program of the educational department of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese.

The building is a frame structure in the rear of the church building. It isn't large but the pupils are comfortably housed.

The unusual thing about the activity of Fr. Lochtefeld in the E. 79th street area is that it is based on a permanent structure. The priest and his assistant might leave but the program goes on under the guidance of the Fathers of the Most Precious Blood.

PARISHIONERS in Our Lady of Blessed Sacrament Church contribute to its support and maintenance but the congregation is not yet sufficiently strong to provide its own priest.

But the religious instruction continues just the same—Fathers of the Precious Blood are not concerned with ability of parishioners to pay—they are interested only in spiritual development.

There is a thrill in meeting two young men such as Fr. Lochtefeld and Fr. Langhals who have dedicated their lives to the mission work of the church.

And that's exactly what these men have done for the society to which they belong pays no other reward than the satisfaction of teaching Christianity.

Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament not only ministers to the spiritual atmosphere but it provides social activities that include playgrounds for the children and recreational opportunities for the adults.

This colored Catholic Church has become a force in the religious sphere of its home neighborhood.



Father Gene Wilson, *Cleveland Memory* Collection.



Sister Juanita Shealey, *Cleveland Memory* Collection.

As of the writing of this article, the detailed plans for the futures of church buildings and church members have yet to be finalized. One can be certain, however, that materials in the Michael Schwartz Library's Special Collections will, when used in conjunction with other primary and secondary sources, help students gain a better understanding of the church's past. In addition to discussing some of that rich history, this *Traditions and Beliefs* story showcases some of the church-related articles and photographs from the Cleveland Press Collection, new digital images collected for Praying Grounds: African American Faith Communities, A Documentary and Oral History Project, and Cleveland Memory, Special Collections' online digital archive.

Religious Roots

Dorothy Ann Blatnica, V.S.C., provides an excellent account of the congregation's early history in *At the Altar of Their God: African American Catholics in Cleveland, 1922-1961*. Blatnica's research shows that, in February of 1922, members of Cleveland's African American Catholic community submitted a petition to the Diocese of Cleveland asking for the establishment of an African American parish, one designed specifically to serve their community just as many national parishes served the needs of the city's White, ethnic communities. More than anything else, the petitioners wanted to create a more nurturing church environment that offered greater opportunities for Catholic children and adults. The petition said, in part:

[We are] deeply conscious of the fact that our usefulness is greatly curtailed. That the holy aspirations which surge within the hearts of our boys to serve as acolytes at the altar of their God, or the virgin longing that inflames the souls of our girls for the loving, devoted service in the various activities of a Catholic parish, is in nearly every case, either smothered in the inception or finally withered away through lack of opportunity and encouragement.²

In his April 1922 response to that petition, Bishop Joseph Schrembs agreed to establish the parish that would come to be known as Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament.³

Blatnica made careful note of the Bishop's "sincere" attitude in 1922, even as she documented the "missionary mentality of the Church," evidence of which is reflected in a 1922 fundraising letter to the Knights of Columbus. Bishop Schrembs stated, among other things:

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Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Church (1923 Building),
Diocese of Cleveland Archives.

We have a responsibility for the Negro. He has a soul that is as white in the sight of God as yours and mine... Look at the Negro in your midst and give him the blessings of the religion that is yours [...]

For Blatnica, the Bishop's words "reinforced the missionary mentality for the prestigious group of white business and professional men, relative to their black fellow Catholics."⁴

Despite the attitude of Diocesan leadership and others, it must also be noted that the city's "colored" Catholics considered themselves to be the equals of other church members. They worked side by side with church and community leaders to establish and maintain a parish where African Americans would enjoy the full benefits of church membership.

The Evidence of Things Seen and Heard

The congregation's first permanent church home was built at 2354 East 79th Street between Central and Quincy Avenues.⁵ Black and white images of this building, which is still standing, are available in the archives of the Diocese of Cleveland on East 9th Street.

The congregation moved to its current home on East 83rd Street in 1961, following its merger with St. Adalbert, which had served as an ethnic parish for Bohemians.⁶ The online Cleveland Memory archive contains two 1975 images of the St. Adalbert-Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Church facilities. Both images are part of Cleveland Memory's Clay Herrick Collection. The Herrick images are but two of the thousands of documents in the Special Collections of Cleveland State University's Michael Schwartz Library. The online archive also contains images of "sons and

daughters" of St. Adalbert-Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, including Sister Juanita Shealey and Father Gene Wilson.

Newspaper clippings in the library's Cleveland Press Collection provide additional information on the history of St. Adalbert – Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament. In a January 7, 1939 *Cleveland Press* article, for example, there is a description of Cleveland's only "colored" Catholic Church as "one of the noteworthy and outstanding missions in the city." At the time of the article's publication, Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament had 800 members, and the adjoining school enrolled 200 students.⁷

Photographs taken during a recent visit to the current church home provide visual evidence of the influence of African American culture in this faith community. Upon entering the nave, for example, there is on the immediate right a life-size statue of Christ. Right away, one notices the dark pigment used for the complexion of this and other figures in works of religious art, including the statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. Linda Gamble, a church staff member, stated that Father Gene Wilson, the parish's first African American priest, believed that the art in the nave of the church should include images of African-descended peoples, and others agreed.⁸

On the left side of the Altar of Sacrifice, a kente draped podium provides additional evidence of African-centered thinking. Kente cloth is woven in Ghana, and, in times past, the elaborate strip cloth was worn only by kings on special occasions.⁹ In this Catholic Church setting, the presence of the kente cloth suggests an appreciation for and, perhaps, a merging of African and American / Western traditions.

The same can also be said of the flags just outside the sacristy door. The symbolism here is significant, because the center flag is the flag of African America, designed by Marcus M. Garvey, a 20th-century Pan-Africanist. According to historian Ron Daniels:

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December 27,
1960 *Plain Dealer*
News Article
Announcing
Plans for Moving
Our Lady of
the Blessed
Sacrament,
Cleveland Press
Collection.



Sculpture of the Crucified Christ, *The Praying Grounds Collection.* (left top)

Speaker's Podium Draped in Kente Cloth, *The Praying Grounds Collection.* (left bottom)

Linda Gamble, Church Receptionist, *The Praying Grounds Collection.* (right top)

These flags, including the red, black, and green flag of African America, are displayed in the St. Adalbert-Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Church, *The Praying Grounds Collection.* (right bottom)

Lead Me, Guide Me: The African America Catholic Hymnal, A GIA Publication, *The Praying Grounds Collection.* (middle)



Statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Christ Child in the nave of the St. Adalbert – Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Church, *Praying Grounds Collection*.

In general terms Garvey saw the Red as a symbol of the blood, suffering and sacrifice of African people historically, the Black for the people, African people, with all of our historical triumphs and achievements, and Green for our African homeland, which must be reclaimed to give life and nourishment to African people on the continent and in the Diaspora.¹⁰

This knowledge of the importance of African American history and culture is also seen in the choir's use of *Lead Me, Guide Me*, the African American Catholic hymnal published by GIA.¹¹ These cultural materials complement rather than replace the traditional Roman Catholic iconography found throughout the church, especially in its beautifully rendered and carefully maintained stained-glass windows.

Like the church, the adjacent school building is in good condition. In the first quarter of 2010, the Diocese announced that the school will remain open, and the Diocese will assume the responsibility for its operation after the current school year.¹² The Vatican has not yet responded to the congregation's petition to keep the church open, but, according to Linda Gamble, church members remain hopeful.

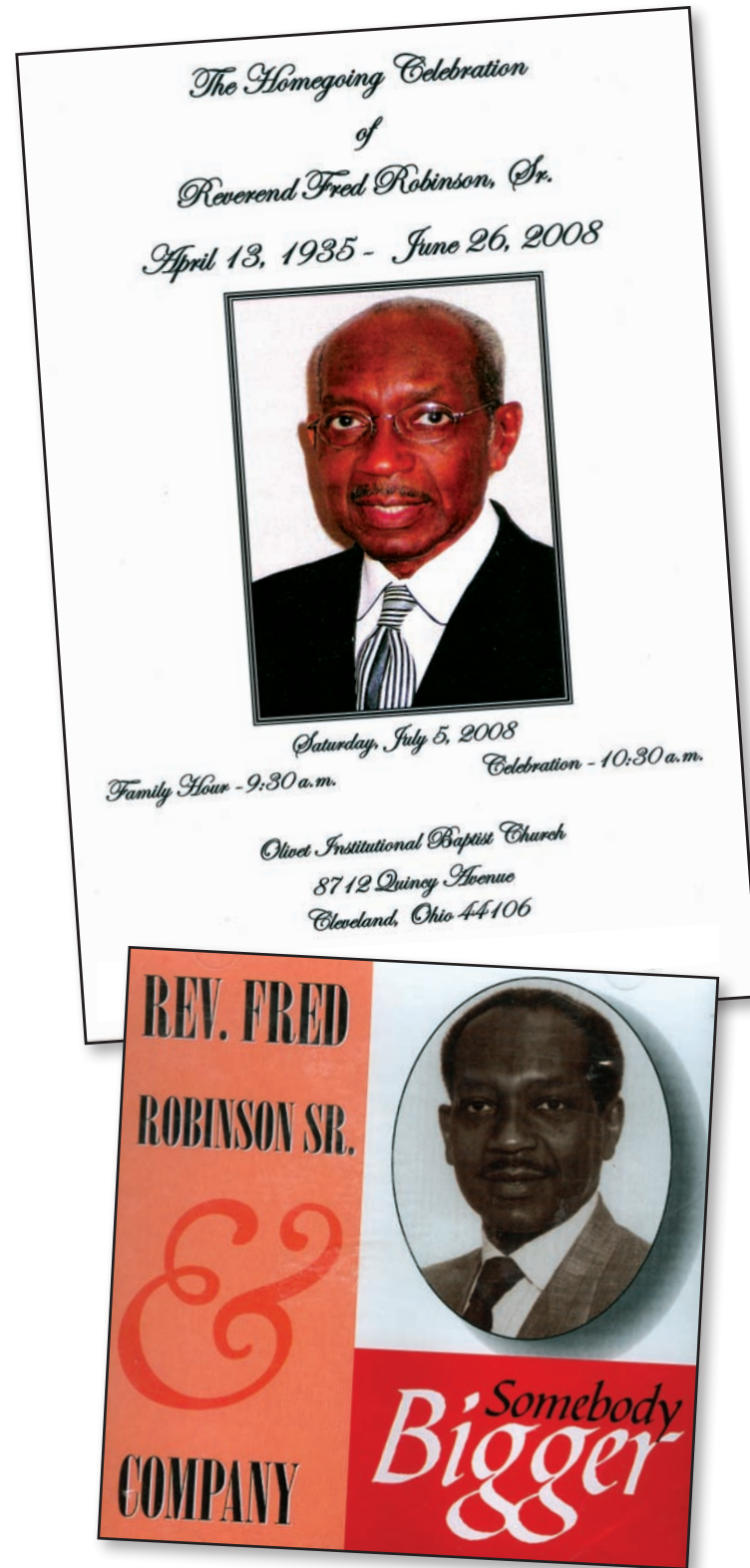
1975 Images of the St. Adalbert-Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Church (side) and School (bottom), *Clay Herrick - Cleveland Memory Collection*



Regardless of the outcome of this congregation's current struggles, *Praying Grounds* will continue to seek the support of church members and others who will work to enhance Special Collections' church-related documents and help preserve this important chapter in our city's religious history.

- 1 Michael O'Malley, *Plain Dealer*, July 19, 2009, Page A 6.
- 2 Dorothy Ann Blatnica, *At the Altar of Their God: African American Catholics in Cleveland, 1922-1961* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 56.
- 3 Blatnica, *At the Altar of Their God*, 57-58.
- 4 Blatnica, *At the Altar of Their God*, 60-61.
- 5 Blatnica, *At the Altar of Their God*, 58. Also, see "Church of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament, 1922-1961," documentary dvd available in church office.
- 6 "Parish to Move to St. Adalbert's," *Plain Dealer*, December 27, 1960.
- 7 See article on page two of this publication, "Priest Conducts Unusual Mission," *Cleveland Press*, January 7, 1939.
- 8 Interview with Linda Gamble, November 19, 2009.
- 9 See Docea A. G. Fianu, *Ghana's Kente and Adinkra: History and Socio-Cultural Significance in a Contemporary Global Economy* (Accra: Black Mask Ltd., 2007).
- 10 Ron Daniels, "Fly The Red, Black And Green On Garvey's Birthday," *The Black World Today*, 25 July 1999, (Accessed December 7, 2009 at <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/138.html>).
- 11 *Lead Me, Guide Me: The African American Catholic Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1987).
- 12 For more information on the status of the school, visit St. Adalbert-Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament's website at <http://www.cleveland.catholicnet.com/parish/stadalbert-44104/>.

The Rev. Fred Robinson – ‘I Believe in God Ministries’ Collection



Archives Update:

The Rev. Fred Robinson – “I Believe in God Ministries” Collection contains materials related to the late minister’s more than 20 years in radio, television, and vocal music. This collection should be of interest to students of history, religious studies, music, communications, and African American culture.

A private gift allowed RASHAD to acquire this collection from Mrs. Corene Robinson. The CLASS Dean’s Office provided funds to hire three Student Research Assistants and Manuscript Processors in January 2010. Vibhav Bhonde, Erin James, and Abhishek Parnerkar completed their initial processing of the collection by the end of January, and the materials are now housed in the *Praying Grounds* section of Library Special Collections. Some of the students’ comments are included on this page, and Rev. Robinson’s *Praying Grounds* interview is available on-line at www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray under “Recent Additions.”

-- RNW

“As a RASHAD Research Assistant, I had the privilege of learning more about Cleveland, Ohio’s history. As someone who was born and raised here, it came as no surprise to me that the local churches played a large role in African-American lives. It was, however, interesting to see just how much the church has affected the people in the interviews. Many would not have been able to accomplish their goals without their local church. The research shows, like so many have stated, that the church is a staple in the African-American community, and its importance cannot be ignored when studying African-American history. As part of the program, I studied [information on] the Praying Grounds website, and took inventory of DVDs, CDs, and VHS tapes. This experience was both educational and fun.”

Erin James

RASHAD Research Assistant and Manuscript Processor

“Working for RASHAD was a great opportunity to get acquainted with the work of a great personality, Rev. Fred Robinson. It is very uncommon to find people who have dedicated their lives [to] touching the spiritual development of the individual, irrespective of their age, race, and class. . . My task of organizing the video recordings and audio material related to the oral history was powerful enough to enable me to write about [Rev. Robinson] so confidently. . . I am sure that one message will always be in my mind, which is a paraphrase of this great man’s words: “We find time for all things in life, and we engage in scores of activities which surround us, but we give hundreds of excuses to evade the meditation over the spiritual introspection which, in a way, is so important to add meaning to everything we do.”

Abhishek Parnerkar

RASHAD Research Assistant and Manuscript Processor

Remembering the Life of Rev. Fred Robinson...

**Excerpts from the Funeral Program*

The Rev. Fred Robinson, Sr. was born in Cleveland, Ohio on April 13, 1935 to the late Deacon James Robinson and Mary Henley Robinson. He attended Cleveland Public Schools and was a graduate of East Technical High School. He attended Kent State University for music and Moody Bible Institute, receiving a B.S. in Biblical Studies in May of 2005.

He joined the Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in 1954 under the pastorate of the Rev. Dr. Odie M. Hoover. He was active in the Music Ministry and a member of the Echoes of Olivet, which later became the Combined Choirs. He also taught a special Vocal Technique Class at Olivet for members and all interested singers. He was licensed, and then ordained on July 26, 1986 at Olivet by the Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., and he served as an Associate Minister.

He was a 50-year member of the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, Inc., founded by the late Dr. Thomas A. Dorsey, now under the leadership of Bishop Kenneth H. Moales, Sr. Rev. Robinson was an active member of the Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA), founded by the late Rev. James Cleveland, and the Gospel Announcers Guild (GAG) for 22 years.

On July 24, 1965, Fred married, as he would tell anyone willing to listen, the love of his life, Corene. From this union one daughter was born, Lorree Ann. Rev. Robinson was employed at Daimler Chrysler for 40 years and retired in March 2008.

Above all else, he knew, he lived, and he loved the Word of God. Rev. Robinson began his radio/TV talk show career in the early 80s with “I Believe in God Ministries.”

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From the Editor...

An American In Nigeria

Confessions of an Engaged Scholar, Part II

I arrived in Nigeria on Friday, January 29, 2010, and my period of discovery began right away, even before I started the research for my Fulbright Fellowship. I discovered, for example, that Nigerian airport employees can spot a confused traveler a mile away. Not long after a kind woman offered to contact the staff at the U.S. Consulate in Lagos for me, I discovered that *O Se* is “thank you” in the Yoruba language. (I also discovered that many of the working people here appreciate generous tips!)

That incident at the airport and many other things about Nigeria remind me of home: rush hour traffic jams, lots of places to eat and shop, a president and other national leaders whose names are in the news every day, millions of people who are trying desperately to live their lives with dignity, and a dynamic university community.

The campus of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), my home for the next five months is, indeed, a complete community unto itself. Among other things, OAU has approximately 26,000 students, more than 1,000 faculty members—and on-campus housing for many of those faculty members—a water treatment facility, a supermarket, schools for the children of staff members, Protestant and Catholic churches, and a mosque, right here in the heart of Yorubaland.

For me, the campus is especially attractive, because of its location in the city of Ile-Ife, in the Osun state. In Cleveland, I had the opportunity to study Yoruba art and culture with Dr. Henry Drewal and Dr. Kathy Curnow, two brilliant art historians and Cleveland State University (CSU) faculty members. From these teacher-scholars I learned that, according to Yoruba oral traditions, the world began at Ile-Ife. There are many artistic traditions associated with Yoruba religion, Ile-Ife, and the Osun state, which is named for a goddess (an *Orisa*) in the Yoruba belief system.

For all of the above reasons, Ile-Ife is an ideal place to study and teach about the role of religion in history, with special emphasis on the experiences of women.

OAU offers degree programs in both history and religion, and I welcome the opportunity to teach courses in American History and give lectures on sacred music in the Black Diaspora, including African American gospel music, knowing that I will also be able to study African Christianities, the influence of Islam in Nigeria’s history, and be immersed in the language and culture of Yorubaland at this same university. Thus far, the work has been very rewarding.

I see this work as part of an ongoing international, interdisciplinary, interreligious dialogue that has the potential to make new contributions to the existing body of knowledge, and build bridges of understanding between religious communities. In 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about the “fierce urgency of,” and the need to bring people together across religious and other boundaries. In that same “I Have a Dream Speech,” one of the most famous statements in the history of American rhetoric, Dr. King also had the courage to describe his vision of a world where “all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics [would] be able to join hands and sing in the words of that Negro Spiritual of old, ‘Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we are free at last.’”

In our time, some contemporary visionary may have the courage to dream of yet another day when, in the spirit of Dr. King, all of God’s children, black women and white women, American women and African women, Christian, Muslim, and Yoruba women, will join hands with other women, men, and children of all races, nationalities, and religions, and sing with renewed faith and joy, “Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we are free at last.”

When that dream becomes reality, I hope that I, a *Praying Grounds* disciple, or some other oral historian, will be there to record the song and document the history!

Peace.

Regennia



Dr. Regennia N. Williams, Visiting Fulbright Scholar, Spring 2010/
Rain Semester, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

RASHAD

Initiative for the Study of Religion
and Spirituality in the History of
Africa and the Diaspora

c/o The Department of History
Cleveland State University
2121 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44115
(216) 523.7182
African.Diaspora@csuohio.edu
www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray/

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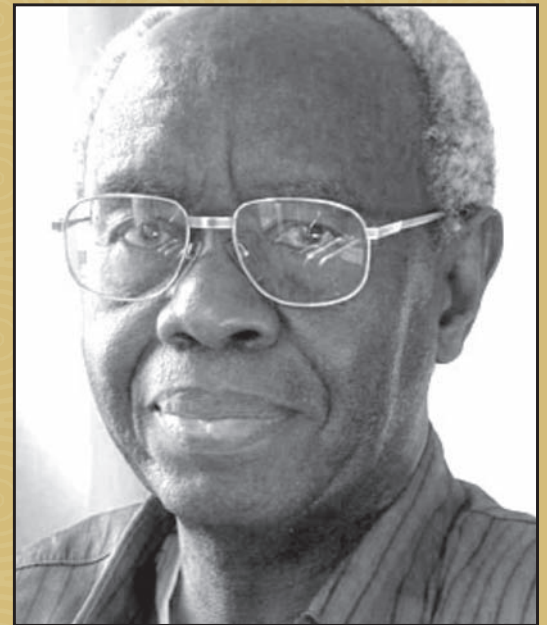
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“Since people are so intimately bound up with their religious life and outlook, their history constitutes the history of their religion. This is an area of study which calls for interdisciplinary cooperation between historians, anthropologists, and theologians.”

— Rev. John S. Mbiti, Ph.D., 1969

From the introduction to *African Religions and Philosophy*

Available Fall 2010



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