

Foreword

I REMEMBER HOW IMPRESSED and delighted I was when I read Cyril Orji's first book, *Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Africa*. Here was a young man writing about struggles in Africa while drawing accurately and constructively upon the thought of the Canadian Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan. Now here he is back at it again, having thought through these issues even more deeply over the course of years. His focus now is on semiotics, particularly as it connects with cultural anthropology and as it can be applied to a theology of inculturation.

Lonergan is still a strong presence in this new book, *A Semiotic Approach to the Theology of Inculturation*, though he is accompanied by a range of other theorists. One of the many strengths of the work is that Orji explains several concepts associated with Lonergan by exploring similar concepts in thinkers such as the philosopher C.S. Pierce and the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Along the way he discusses in depth the thinking of Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Susanne Langer, Judith Butler, and Jean-Marc Ela.

Africa remains a major presence in this new work, as Orji discusses African Traditional Religions (ATRs), the African Independent Churches (AICs), and Islam in Africa, noting the genuine challenges and opportunities they present to the non-native churches. Even more importantly, he carves out insights that a semiotic approach can yield concerning the tragic horrors in the recent histories of the Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, and Sierra Leone.

Orji, like the thinkers whom he emulates, is an integrator of ideas and methods. Few Western scholars can speak both as a Christian believer and as an academic researcher without switching hats in the process. Orji speaks in these two ways seamlessly with one voice as he weaves together into a coherent whole a range of elements that might otherwise seem disparate. For example, when I was a college student (way back in the last century) I myself studied Ogden and Richard's *The Meaning of Meaning*, the Sapir-Whorf

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hypothesis, and Susanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*. Then in graduate school I became interested in the work of Clifford Geertz. I wrote my dissertation with a focus on Bernard Lonergan. Later I was introduced to the thought of C.S. Pierce. I found each part of this material to be fascinating in its own right, but I never thought through the interconnectedness of the various authors' approaches. Orji puts together the pieces of this puzzle. All of these thinkers focusing on the world as constructed through human meaning in a way that fights against various forms of reductionism. How is it that one can think through and implement practical solutions to concrete problems in the real world without becoming reductionist?

Semiotics serves as Orji's focal point for addressing this question. Semiotics informs a cultural anthropology that takes seriously the open-ended nature of the human quest, the reality and value of various types of diversity, and the inevitability of communicative interaction among different groups. It is no accident that the final chapter offers practical advice about the do's and don'ts of developing and applying a theology of inculturation. Orji passionately believes that, when it comes to human conflicts leading to atrocities, human beings can do better. If we are to understand ourselves as well as others, we must seek out together the higher viewpoints that are achievable by making use of our God-given capacities for making meaning. The universe in which we live may often seem puzzling, but ultimately it is coherent, and we have the tools to reach ever closer to grasping its coherence. Let us focus together on meaning, language, symbols, cultures, actions, and God.

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