STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

# Learning from African theology

**IN 1969**, a young Anglican priest and theologian from Kenya named John Mbiti published the book *African Religions and Philosophy*. Mbiti had been raised in a Christian family in eastern Kenya. A promising student, he eventually found his way to Cambridge University, where he earned a Ph.D. in theology before returning to Africa to teach at Makerere University in Uganda.

In the course of his theological studies in the early 1960s, Mbiti frequently encountered Western writers who still referred to Africa as the "dark continent" and dismissed traditional African religions as demonic and anti-Christian. Haunted by those caricatures, he embarked on a massive study of proverbs, traditions and religious practices across the African continent. The results of that study, *African Religions and Philosophy*, was one of the first texts to assert the coherence of African traditional religions. African religious beliefs, he insisted, had a structure and logic just as complex and intriguing as the established theological tradition of the Christian West. Moreover, he argued, many Africans knew God—and indeed were Christian—long before the appearance of European missionaries.

"The God described in the Bible," Mbiti wrote in 1980, "is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of our traditional African religiosity. The missionaries who introduced the gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God to our continent. Instead, God brought *them*."

Mbiti's work was controversial. Some African scholars resented that he defended traditional religions within the framework of Western Christian theology. Others challenged the idea of an "African" understanding of religion, as opposed to an emphasis on the distinctive qualities of each particular belief system. And many Western theologians were stunned by

## Do you know us theologically?

Mbiti's suggestion that traditional African religions had anything to teach them about Christianity.

Yet Mbiti persisted in his vision of bringing African, Asian and European theologians together into dialogue. As director of the World Council of Church's Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland, he hosted a series of influential conferences in the 1970s on such themes as "Confessing Christ in Different Cultures" and "Indigenous Theology and the Universal Church" that highlighted African and Asian contributions to contemporary theology.

Along the way, Mennonite missiologists took note of Mbiti's work, particularly his claim that God was already present in the religious traditions they encountered. In a 1976 essay, Mbiti framed a pointed question I have not been able to shake from my mind. "Theologians from the new (or younger) churches," he wrote, "have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of the older churches. We had no alternative. We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you. But it has all been one-sided; it has all been, in a sense, your theology.... We know you theologically. The question is, Do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?"

Today, Anabaptist-Mennonite churches in Africa comprise the largest percentage of our global family; and they continue to be among the fastest-growing groups. According to Andrew Walls, a pre-eminent historian of global Christianity, "African Christianity is *the* representative Christianity of the 21st century.... What happens within the African churches in the next generation will determine the whole shape of church history for centuries to come."

John Mbiti died on Oct. 6 at the age of 87. Though many readers likely have never heard of him, Mbiti's legacy is profound. And the question he posed remains essential for anyone interested in the life of the church beyond our borders: "Do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?"

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