

## Engaging African Realities: Integrating Social Science within African Theology REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

### **Award Announcement**

The Nagel Institute, with generous support from the Templeton Religion Trust, invites project proposals for the “Engaging African Realities: Integrating Social Science within African Theology” initiative. Its aim is to support African theologians to engage in fresh social scientific integrated approaches with the goal of producing creative and original projects in grounded theology. We understand grounded theology as an attempt at realizing the potential of theological creativity from the bottom-up, as opposed to a top-down approach. The project will seek to emphasize how grounded theology is compatible with grounded theory in social sciences as a method for seeking hidden patterns and meanings through ethnography, a better way to unearth stories informing people’s everyday lives and enable a more thorough answer to questions arising from African realities.

Beginning in January 2021, this initiative will select outstanding early-career African theologians with compelling research project ideas and make 12 grants of not more than \$50,000 USD each for three-year research and curricular development projects. The awards will enable grantees to participate in three intensive workshops on social science theory, methods and skills needed for grounded theology, and provide support for research on one of two topical areas:

1. African traditional values and spirituality with reference to religious experience
2. Religious innovation and competition focusing on African resources for innovation

Successful projects will feature both fresh research into contemporary African realities and the incorporation of this new knowledge into African theological research and curriculum.

Submission of proposals will be in two stages. The Letter of Inquiry (LOI) is due September 15, 2020. Then, following review and selection, the Full Proposal is due December 1, 2020.

### **Background**

Africa has turned massively Christian in recent times, which presents many opportunities for progress in theology. African theology is strategically important to Christianity worldwide, because Africa is now home to nearly a quarter of all the world’s Christians and may become home to 40 percent of all Christians within the next quarter century. The quality of Christian thinking worldwide might depend increasingly on the quality of theologizing coming from Africa. Moreover, the quality of theological thinking in Africa might also depend on its gaining new capabilities in social science theorizing and empirical research on the one hand, and grounded theology on the other, then integrating this knowledge into African Christian theology. Across sub-Saharan Africa, Christian theologians are keen to do “grounded theology,” in order to engage the patterns of life today and realities in a rapidly changing continent. Meaningful theological exploration of this kind demands interdisciplinary approaches, methods, and strategies centered in empirical research. Due to a paucity of published literature in empirical studies featuring Africa, direct engagement in empirical research projects is often the most responsible way of engaging African realities. We want to emphasize ethnography, because among the different social scientific approaches, ethnography arguably has some of the closest affinities to theology, particularly in the recently budding sub-field, the anthropology of Christianity. Social scientists engaged in

ethnographic research could learn from theology just as theologians has something to learn from ethnography. Since ethnography is a methodologically centered discipline, there is no better way to become acquainted with it than to engage in ethnographic methodology.

Bruce A. Stevens introduces the idea that grounded theory might be useful for theology, which could then be termed grounded theology (2016). The basic principle of grounded theory is that the researcher derives insights from the data rather than imposing preconceived theory upon the data. As Stevens demonstrates based on his extensive qualitative studies, “the aim of grounded theology is to develop theology from the bottom up.” The methodology is essentially that of grounded theory, and involves looking for emergent themes in the data, articulating what might be considered a theological insight and evaluating this in light of the theological tradition (2018). Grounded theology emerges from intimate and close observation of everyday life and strives to be rooted in everyday realities. Thus, drawing fresh insights from Stevens, we understand “grounded theology” in this project as an attempt at realizing the potential of theological creativity from the ground up, as opposed to a top-down approach. As Stevens aptly adds, “this may encourage input from different theological perspectives, potentially from a variety of disciplines, and from those highly skilled in research methodology (2017:204-5).”

The social scientific research methods and analytical constructs needed to do grounded theology effectively are largely absent from Africans’ theological education. Not only does the rising generation of African theological leaders need such equipage, but there must also be changes in how African professors of theology are educated. If theologians integrate social science into theological education, the rising generation of African theologians will be equipped to mine Africa’s rich social environment more effectively. They will be able to contribute more fully to the life and ministry of the church and to the public good as well.

This project, therefore, will equip a select group of up-and-coming African theologians to integrate discoveries and insights produced by empirical research into their theological reflection and teaching. The project will seek to emphasize how grounded theology is compatible with grounded theory in social sciences as a method for seeking hidden patterns and meanings through ethnography, a better way to unearth stories informing people’s everyday lives and enable a more thorough answer to questions arising from African realities. It will be important to the success of our program that our workshops not only teach ethnography and the various theoretical approaches to it, but also get the grantees to work explicitly at gaining fresh theological insights, and to make “progress in theology” thereby. Thus, through three intensive project workshops, we will underscore how grounded theology could be based on a set of techniques that emphasize the creation of theoretical statements from the qualitative data gathered, ethnographically. Here, the participant observer engages in grounded theology (grounded theory) cycles between episodes of data collection and data analysis, the one informing the other. In this way, the new approach to grounded theology is supported by the grounded theory method borrowed from the social sciences. With our current project focusing on two topical areas: “African traditional values and spirituality with reference to religious experience”, and “Religious innovation and competition focusing on African sources for innovation” we imagine proposals that tap into rich resources for theology as found in Africa.

### **Key Questions**

Successful proposals will address questions within one of these two topical areas of high interest and relevance.

#### **1. African traditional values and spirituality with reference to religious experience**

African traditional values and spirituality percolate across the church, public and academy. On a continent beset by corruption and conflicts, might it be possible to see African values and the abundant religious expressions on the continent as part of the solution rather than simply a source of the problem? How might theologians identify values that are grounded in African traditions but also enhance human flourishing in rapidly changing Africa? How has traditional spiritual traits survived in the contemporary scene and modulated within Christianity? How has this spirituality accommodated itself to urbanization, technological, political and socioeconomic changes? Are cardinal African values and virtues substantially different from those of other cultures or from those considered as universal values? If African values are different, what difference do they make especially in the religious experiences? Do they in fact contribute to human flourishing? If so, how can one make sense of this through empirical research and what would be the value for

theology? How do the natural and the supernatural realms interact in terms of illness, health and healing, and how do Africans reconcile competing claims of healing and wellness? How might we investigate the relationships between spirituality, science and health in the face of pandemics such as COVID-19, Ebola, HIV and AIDS? How do the changing circumstances of African life affect traditional African values and spiritual proclivities? What can the church and grounded theology gain from a deeper knowledge of African values and spirituality and their interaction with contemporary life?

## **2. Religious innovation and competition focusing on African sources for innovation**

Religions constitute some of the most dynamic forces in Africa today, and researchers are trying to catch up with their numerical growth, proliferating forms and cultural influence. Christianity in Africa is amazingly innovative, diverse and competitive. To what extent are religious innovation, diversity and competition vehicles or drivers of creative change? Is religious competition a destructive or a constructive force? Does it enable innovation and foster creativity? What happens to secularity in the context of religious innovation and competition? What is the relationship between religious innovation and commercial entrepreneurship? How do new religious forms and patterns relate to broader social and institutional changes in contemporary Africa? How do local religious initiatives relate to global trends and movements, as in the worldwide rise of Pentecostalism? Might these new religious developments, which reflect African agency, resilience and creativity, suggest a more positive approach to the study of contemporary Africa? What might theologians learn from the complex interactions of violent conflicts, peace and reconciliation, mutual coexistence and human flourishing in the face of religious competition? How might African resources for innovation be mined for advancing grounded theology? How might the insights emerging from projects in this area also be of benefit to the wider world beyond Africa?

### **Project Focus**

This project will have the following aims and features:

- To equip early-career African theologians to exemplify the use of social science research methods and grounded theology scholarship, to integrate ethnographic discoveries and insights into their theological reflection on African realities, in their pursuit of research, publication and curricular development in one of two topical areas:
  - a. African traditional values and spirituality with reference to religious experience
  - b. Religious innovation and competition focusing on African resources for innovation
- To engage grantees in three intensive project workshops:
  - a. Starting Out – origins and basics, and introduction to research
  - b. Writing and Reading Ethnography
  - c. Teaching in Theological Contexts
- To focus on ethnography and the various theoretical approaches to it, and to support grantees to gain fresh theological insights, and thus make progress in theology.
- To underscore in the workshops how grounded theology could be based on a set of techniques, which emphasize the creation of theoretical statements from the qualitative data gathered, ethnographically.
- To facilitate mentorship and networking in interdisciplinary settings through:
  - a. featuring senior project advisers and seasoned resource persons from both theology and the social sciences to provide guidance and support to grantees through their stages of research, analysis and writing
  - b. providing opportunities to each grantee to spend 2-4-month period for library research and intensive writing time at one of three robust theological libraries: Princeton Theological Seminary, Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and The Nagel Institute at Calvin University
  - c. offering a rich array of dissemination opportunities and media to assist grantees in order to lay a foundation for a sustained, interdisciplinary engagement and networking. These supports should enable grantees to:
    - a. produce books, book chapters, journal articles for academic publications
    - b. disseminate research findings at local and major international conferences, including the summative conference, meeting concurrently with the African Association for the Study of Religion

- c. conduct local and regional conferences, workshops and briefings
- d. produce media offerings focused on their findings
- To incorporate discoveries and new theologizing into curricular development, thus strengthening social sciences and grounded theology's integration into African theological education.
- To focus on African theological institutions and programs. It aims to help them employ and develop their capacities as conveners of research and scholarship and to embed the fresh insights they gain from research within their programs of teaching and community service.

### **Funded Research**

Grant funding includes support for research teams, led by the selected grantees that will draw on local, regional and international talent. These teams would focus first on new research projects and then on developing teaching modules, courses, publications, media pieces and continuing education events that would disseminate the new discoveries and embed them into the ongoing program of education.

### **Grant Eligibility & Requirements**

1. Grantees must have a doctoral degree in Theology earned no earlier than 2010.
2. Institutions receiving grants must be situated in Africa and offer post-graduate degrees in Theology (masters or doctoral degrees).
3. Grantees must be employed by the theological program that is hosting the grant.
4. Expatriates and African scholars from other departments or universities are welcome on teams as co-investigators or consultants.
5. Scholars doing research to complete advanced degrees are welcome to participate on teams, but they are not eligible to be the grantee.
6. Projects that are primarily historical or biblical in emphasis, or that focus primarily on texts, are not eligible to be funded.
7. Proposed projects must feature empirical research as well as theological reflection.

### **Letters of Inquiry (LOIs) due September 15, 2020**

LOIs accepted in English, French, or Portuguese

LOIs must be submitted via e-mail attachment as a single document to: [nagel@calvin.edu](mailto:nagel@calvin.edu)

All applicants will be notified of their project's selection status by October 9, 2020

#### LOIs will be part of a brief dossier that includes:

1. LOI of no more than 5 pages total, to include:
  - a. a brief intellectual bio of the inquirer stating her or his reasons for desiring to be part of this project
  - b. a brief discussion of the research idea the inquirer wants to pursue (length to be no more than 2 pages of the 5-page total)
  - c. a listing of the host institution and desired team members
  - d. some thoughts about how this project might prompt curricular change at one's home institution
2. A written endorsement of the project by the dean or head of the host theological program. This endorsement must include a statement indicating the inquirer's strategic value to the institution, the curricular value of the line of research the inquirer is proposing, and a pledge of support for the inquirer and his or her aims.
3. A letter of nomination from a senior scholar not at the host theological program.
4. An abbreviated curriculum vitae or academic resume (2-3 pp maximum) for the inquirer.

### **Full Proposals (by invitation) due December 1, 2020**

1. Proposals must be submitted on the templates for narrative and budget supplied.

2. Proposals must be submitted via e-mail attachment as a single document to: [nagel@calvin.edu](mailto:nagel@calvin.edu)
3. The words "Engaging African Realities" should appear in the subject line.
4. An acknowledgment email will be sent within five business days of receiving your full proposal.
5. All questions about the application process should be sent to: [nagel@calvin.edu](mailto:nagel@calvin.edu)

### **Use of grant funds**

Grant funds may be used to cover the following items:

1. Research expenses directly related and essential to the project including travel and lodging (for research as well as travel and lodging), project advisor site visit, research assistance, transcription costs, translation costs, archive and library access, digital technology for visual documentation, and other relevant research expenditures.
2. Purchase of essential equipment (cost not to exceed \$2,000). After the end of the project, equipment becomes the property of the host institution.
3. Host institutions' replacement costs for researchers' releases from teaching courses.
4. Costs for dissemination: conferences, workshops, publications, curricular planning and materials.
5. Charges for the host institution's indirect costs. We can allow no more than a 10 percent charge for the host institution's indirect costs.
6. Grant funds may not include:
  - a. Travel or subsistence for non-project personnel
  - b. Expenses incurred prior to or following the effective dates of the grant

### **Selection Process and Criteria**

Once LOIs are submitted, they will be reviewed briefly by the project director and administrators for eligibility of the proposer, completeness of portfolio and basic germaneness to the RFP's two stated themes and questions. All proposals that pass these basic requirements will then be sent for review by the project's advisory and selection committee. The committee will select about 25 of the LOIs to invite to prepare full proposals. Once these proposals have been received, each committee member will evaluate and rank the proposals. The committee will convene in early January 2021, to select the 12 top-ranked proposals, plus one or two alternates. All applicants will be notified of their status by January 20, 2021.

Reviewers look for these key attributes and score LOIs accordingly:

1. The inquirer, project and host institution, having met the basic eligibility requirements stated in our guidelines.
2. The project shows promise of strategic importance for the field of African Christian theology.
3. The project idea is creative, original, and significant: it engages unanswered questions and/or uncharted territory.
4. The project team is qualified and interdisciplinary: it matches the project's needs for relevant skills, experience and expertise.

Reviewers look for these key attributes and score full proposals accordingly:

1. They use the provided templates and thereby include all the expected elements of a good project proposal.
2. They make a cogent and compelling statement of how the advanced learning in the social sciences and their integration into theological thinking would benefit the inquirer and his or her host institution.
3. They clearly address the problem or issue at hand, based on a review of extant research.
4. They include a clear and careful statement of how the project would address these questions (e.g. its methods, approaches).
5. They lay out a concrete and feasible work plan and project schedule.

6. They offer a clear and reasonable budget with concrete explanations of each expense.
7. They plan to deliver a definite set of products that would result from the project (e.g. publications, media, conferences/workshops, curricular development).
8. Because this project focuses on curricular development as well as research and publication, it has a definite plan to put these discoveries to use in theological teaching and learning.
9. There is a clear indication from institutional leaders that their institution owns and values this proposed project.

### **Basic requirements**

Once selected, grantees will commit to:

1. Undertake the proposed research on the selected theme/topic during the allotted time frame.
2. Provide regular reports on progress of project as stated in the contract.
3. Communicate regularly (e.g. via email) with an assigned project adviser and the research director as stated in the contract.
4. Participate in the three intensive workshops and final culminating conference.
5. Offer at least one high-quality scholarly journal article, and a book chapter.
6. Draw up a plan to show how they have incorporated what they have learned into their curriculum.

### **Project Chair**

Afe Adogame, Maxwell M. Upson Professor of Religion and Society, Princeton Theological Seminary, USA

### **Project Administrators**

Retief Müller and Nellie Kooistra of the Nagel Institute, Calvin University, USA

Direct all questions to:

Engaging African Realities

Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity

Calvin University

3201 Burton St. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, USA

[nagel@calvin.edu](mailto:nagel@calvin.edu) 616-526-7155