Our Stories as Fifth Gospels

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Since the publication of the book A Fifth Gospel: The Experience of Black Christian Values (Orbis Books and SCM Press, 1981) I have received a lot of comments, criticism and questions about the title. Every now and then I get the joking question: "Have you written The Sixth Gospel yet?" These comments and questions have challenged me to search further and ask some deeper questions: Is "A Fifth Gospel" a valid expression in today's church and world? What meaning does it have for our Post-Vatican II World Church? What does it say to contemporary praxis and theology?

I propose that "A Fifth Gospel" and "Fifth Gospels" is a valuable and valid metaphor in theologizing today. As a metaphor I suggest that "Gospel" or "Good News" can be applied to how God is revealing Himself through our human experience and daily lives. In light of the insights of the Theology of Story or Narrative Theology, our stories of faith are examples of fifth gospels. In this article I will try to examine more closely the history and deeper meaning of "A Fifth Gospel" and "Fifth Gospels"; look at this metaphor from the perspectives of the theology of revelation and Christology; and narrate three concrete stories (examples) of Africa's Fifth Gospel.

I write not as a trained theologian but as a grassroots missionary trying hard to reflect on lived experience and our contemporary signs of the times in the light of the bible and Tradition. In sharing these pastoral theological reflections I welcome further comments and questions.

Brief History of the Metaphor "A Fifth Gospel"

The common understanding of the term "Canon of Scripture" is that it denotes the collection or list of books acknowledged and accepted by the Catholic Church as inspired. The formation of the New Testament such as the four canonical books that record the Good News of Jesus Christ -- the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- was a gradual process:

As the number of living witnesses gradually dwindled, and as the number of communities increased through the rapid spread of the faith, it became more and more apparent how valuable it would be for the instruction of future generations if there were written records of the teaching, life, death and resurrection of our Lord. These written records, or Gospels, as they came to be called, would pass from one community to another in the same way as the letters, and each community would add the new writings to its collection as soon as they came to hand. (A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture 1953:18)

There were also various apocrypha gospels written. Of particular note are the infancy gospels -- the Protoevangelium of James and the Gospel of Thomas. So from the earliest Christian times references were made to other gospels in addition to the Four Canonical Gospels.

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For most people the word "Gospel" has a sacrosanct, unique and exclusive meaning -- the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Four Gospels are the source and foundation of the Christian faith containing the words and actions of Jesus Christ Himself. The Four Gospels are the public and divine revelation of God for all peoples of all times. These Four Gospels cannot be replaced. They cannot be added to or subtracted from.

Yet for other people the word "gospel" can be used in an analogous sense as a metaphor. Without diminishing the sacredness and uniqueness of the Four Canonical Gospels, the word "gospel" can be used for different kinds of faith stories of "good news". Different people can write gospels. So various fifth gospels have emerged in a metaphorical sense. In Christian literature Isaiah has been called "a Fifth Gospel". So has the Acts of the Apostles which is also referred to as the "Gospel of the Holy Spirit".

In the 19th century a walking pilgrimage of the Holy Land was called "a Fifth Gospel". When visiting the Holy Places the pilgrim, Bible in hand, would retrace the steps of Jesus and relive the events in the Four Canonical gospels. In the early 20th century a book was written on spirituality called A Fifth Gospel. Various novels contain references to "a Fifth Gospel" -- some devout, some critical. A recent novel in Italian is entitled Un Quinto Vangelo (A Fifth Gospel). In his novel Fratricides Nikos Kazantzakis writes:

   The teacher burst into laughter. "My priest, turn the pages of the Bible, there's a supplement -- read the Fifth Gospel -- the Holy Gospel 'according to Lenin'. That's where you'll find it." (1971:180)

The metaphor "a Fifth Gospel" occasionally appears in theological writings. Edward Schillebeeckx's explanation is found on page 21 of this article. Rudolf Steiner's book A Fifth Gospel was translated into English from German in 1985. Joest Mnemba's doctorate dissertation African Ecumenical Theology -- The Battle for the African Church: Developing a Conception and Praxis for an Effective Ecumenical Church in Malawi is creative. It uses "An African Fifth Gospel" to describe the best ideas and values on African Traditional Religion (especially the values of harmony, inclusiveness, community and unity), African socialism and African Humanism. He shows how these Fifth Gospel values are necessary components of biblical revelation as well, especially in view of the Christology in John 17 (1986).

The Malawian theologian Patrick Kalilombe states:

   The point is not how many canonical gospels there are, but to highlight the importance of people appropriating the Gospel in their own lives and within their culture and contexts. Calling this merely "living the Gospel" is not strong enough. One needs to stress that in this appropriation there is a real creativeness, a newness, an opening up of the potentialities of Christ's message into hitherto uncharted areas. People need to come to grips with that if they are to take seriously what is called "inculturation" or incarnation. (1985:1)

Probing a Deeper Meaning of "A Fifth Gospel"

In the book A Fifth Gospel: The Experience of Black Christian Values I explain the meaning of the title in two short sections on pages XVI and 129. This was clearly insufficient. I was taken aback by the strong protests and criticisms from certain quarters. Using the expression "A Fifth Gospel" was misunderstood by some, confusing to others, offensive to still others. One example is representative. The Editor of Benedictine Publications Ndanda-Peramiho who arranged the Swahili abridged edition of A