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Kenyan feminist theologian Teresia Mbari Hinga (Courtesy of Pauline Kenly)



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The calling of a theologian is not to become the doctrinal police officer for the ecclesial tradition to which they belong. Rather, at the core of the vocation of a theologian is a Spirit-led orientation toward the plights of those who live at the peripheries of society. This orientation allows for the theologian to call attention to such plights in a persistent manner that allows for conversion to take place in the hearts of those who create and benefit from such peripheries.

Teresia Mbari Hinga, who died on March 31, was definitely the type of theologian that I have described above. In fact, she was more than that.

I got to know her in 2007, when I began my doctoral studies in systematic theology. Over the years, we shared many spaces as theologians from the continent of Africa working in institutions in the United States of America. What made Hinga a theologian to be reckoned with was her ability to be a keen observer of social systems that disenfranchise individuals, societies and cultures.

At the heart of Hinga's theological imagination was a persistent call to the academy, church and world to take seriously the transformative power of conversion.

For her, conversion was not simply a ritual of the heart. It is also an embrace of concrete actions that bring about a new way of existing for those who have lost their own authentic humanity through their embrace and use of power to marginalize their victims.

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In Hinga's view, the theologian who allows herself to be the agent that the Spirit uses to spark this process into existence does so by being attuned to the signs of the times. Such a theologian understands that she cannot be found worthy by the Spirit unless she allows herself to become an existential paradox in the face of the logic and systems of evil defining the world.

To be an existential paradox is to transcend the culture and boundaries created by those who embody a tribalist orientation in church and society. It is also a summons by the Spirit for one to dwell in the cracks of church and society so that a clearer view of what is going on at the centers of church and society can be had, and they can be critiqued in a manner that allows for new ways of being in such spaces.

Hinga was a theologian and a human being who embodied Spirit-centered paradoxes. Coming from a colonized society, Kenya, where women have been reduced to footnotes in the annals of history due to the enduring power of colonial trauma, and being a prophetic voice in a church and a world that struggles to center the voices of women in shaping their collective imaginations, Hinga dared to dream and imagine new ways of doing transformative theology.

To call Hinga an African feminist theologian is to reduce her insightfulness to the domain of colonial theology. She was a global theologian all the way. In her most recent book, 2017's [*African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters*](#), Hinga reminded the world of the relevance of an embrace of a way of doing theology that is radically anamnestic — that is, bringing forward the rich memories of Africa's past, present, and imaginative and Spirit-centered future.

Theology is rooted in the collective memories of a people. This rootedness allows for the theologian to interrogate the current realities that society faces in order to dream of a better future that is both concrete and imaginary. In fact, all theologies are about an embrace of a healthy imagination.



Theologian Teresia Mbari Hinga, right, converses with Uganda theologian Margaret Ssebunya during a conference hosted by Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in July 2018. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

In that work, Hinga, who was an associate professor of religious studies at Santa Clara University in California, retrieves the forgotten memories of African praxis of the theological that the Western colonial matrix has attempted to reduce to the domain of the fetish.

Through Hinga's insightfulness and creative abilities, the story of [Kimpa Vita \(Dona Beatrice\)](#), who was maligned and murdered by the Portuguese imperialists and missionaries in the ancient Kingdom of the Kongo during the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, is told using a decolonial methodology. By telling Kimpa Vita's story in a manner that frees her legacy from the distracting plot initiated by the benefactors of the legacy of slavery and imperialism in Africa, Hinga centers the primacy of the feminine in African cultural, cosmo-philosophical tradition and ecclesial expressions.

An enduring trauma effected by Western colonialism is the deliberate production of fragmented memories. When some scholars speak of Africa's cultural traditions in the current context as an appeal to their past, they tend to retrieve an idolatrous past constructed intentionally by the colonial agents who put in place systems of production of knowledge intended to erase the rainbow realities defining the continent's heritage.

To address this enduring colonial plot of erasure, Hinga, along with other African women theologians, founded [The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians](#) (often known simply as The Circle) in 1989. The Circle is a prophetic witness to the egalitarian nature of knowledge production and the sustenance of life for all, both in Africa and beyond, by African women.



Teresia Mbari Hinga, second from right, seen with family last year (Courtesy of Pauline Kenly)

Being a voice of life for all, when HIV/AIDS became the burden of the world, Hinga used her scholarship to address the question: What hope can the world have in light of the culture of death that faces all? In 2008, Hinga, along with other scholars, edited the anthology [*Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges*](#).

In this work, Hinga and the others probed deeply the systemic issues at play that make African societies and ecclesial institutions unable to offer a pragmatic and enduring response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Her work is insightful because it helped to shed light on the strategy of making Africa the culprit of the spread of the disease and to address the false notion that Africans embrace a bankrupt moral vision.

It was from the rich heritage of African moral wisdom that Hinga showed how both church and society can pragmatically respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Just as life is constituted and shaped by multiple factors at play in the world, Hinga's intellectual contributions were not limited to a silo focus, as tends to be the case for some scholars. Her fertile intellectual and social justice interests led her to take seriously the environmental crises facing Africa and beyond.

Among her many works addressing the issues at stake was an edited anthology published in 2021: [*Valuing Lives, Healing Earth: Religion, Gender, and Life on Earth*](#). As scholarships on African ecofeminism continue to grow, Hinga's contributions to that discipline stand out. She drew from African economic, ecological, anthropological, spiritual and philosophical consciousness to articulate a way forward for caring for humanity's common home — the Earth.



Teresia Mbari Hinga attends a conference at Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya, in August 2015. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

As she shared with some of her admirers in 2013 at a conference held at Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya, "a theologian must be restless in the pursuit of ecological justice for all."

She saw her agency as a human being, a woman and an African as one intended to be a source of life for all who live at the peripheries of the world. Even if those involved are nonhumans, they deserve to live abundant lives in the manner God

intends.

A turn to the feminine is an embrace of life for all in the African consciousness. Consequently, when one reads the contributions and legacies of Hinga to academia, church and society, both in the global north and south, one notices that the centering of the motif of abundant life and the role of the feminine in ensuring that the flourishing of all beings is embraced.

On that note, Hinga used her voice to start new conversations that broadened the circle of life for all. She wrote, taught classes, and gave interviews, plenary papers and keynotes around the world on topics that helped to shed light on the plight of the poor, wherever they may be found.

If one were to describe Hinga and her legacy, it would be that she was a courageous scholar who dared to think. The best way to honor her legacy is to embrace the virtue of courage and to dare to think, in defiance of those who would like to preserve the status quo that benefits some and erases others, whether they be in academia, church or wider society.

Finally, Hinga will be remembered as a cheerful, hospitable, kind and wise human being. As a graduate student and a newly minted scholar, Hinga took me beneath her matriarchal wings, and, like a wise African woman, she taught me how to lean into my own agency as an ally of the women's movement for peace and justice in the world.

As it is said in Africa, an iroko tree has fallen to give birth to new trees that will sustain all life on Mother Earth. Hinga died on March 31. But her creative insights and wisdom will continue to enrich the blossoming scholarship going on today in Africa and beyond.

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